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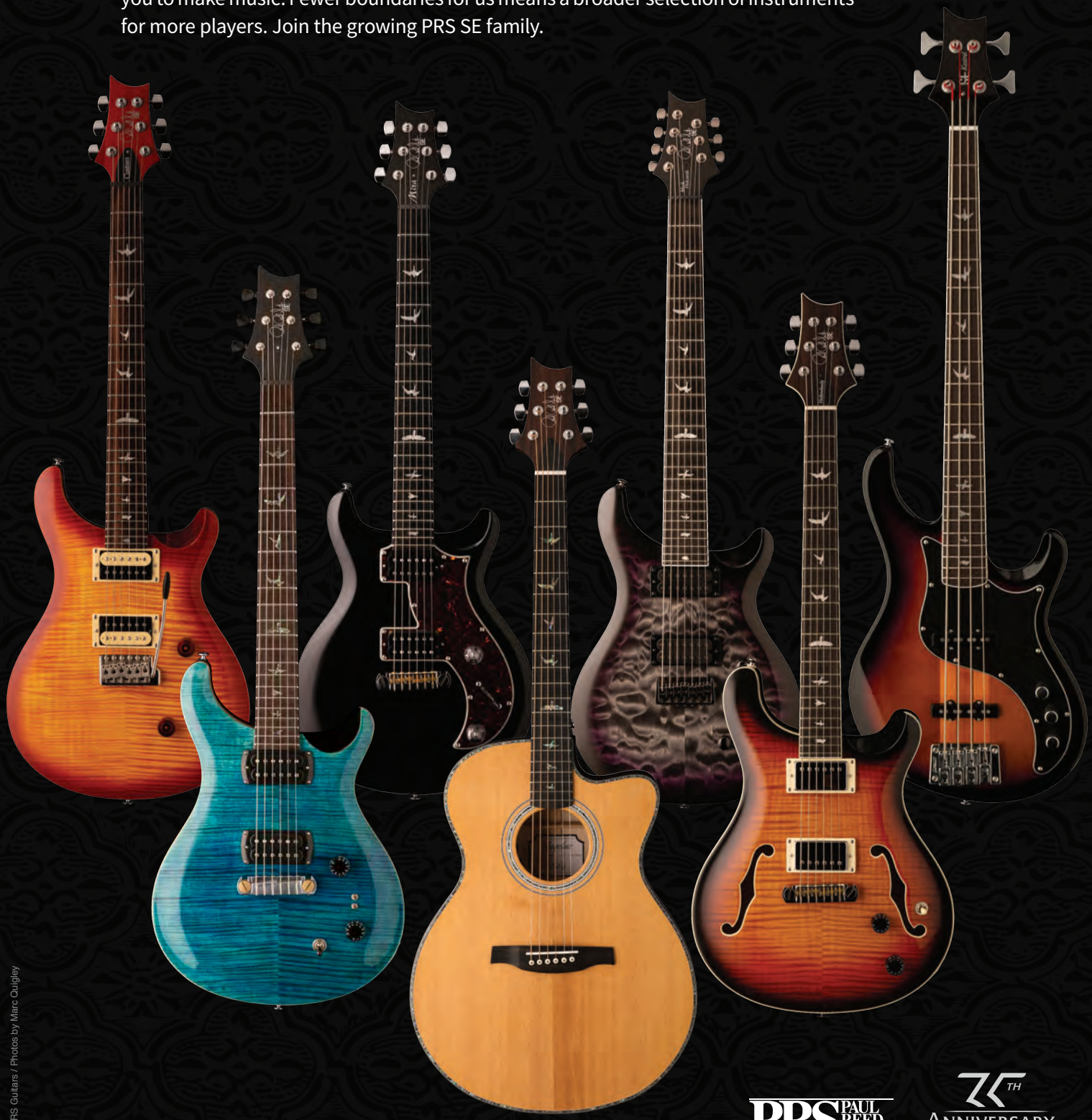
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Detail of “Birds of Paradise,” by Grit Laskin



NAOMI FINLAY, COURTESY OF GRIT LASKIN

Within the last two decades, several fabricated materials, including dye-stabilized wood, acrylics, and engineered stone have dramatically added to the traditional materials of shell, wood, and bone.
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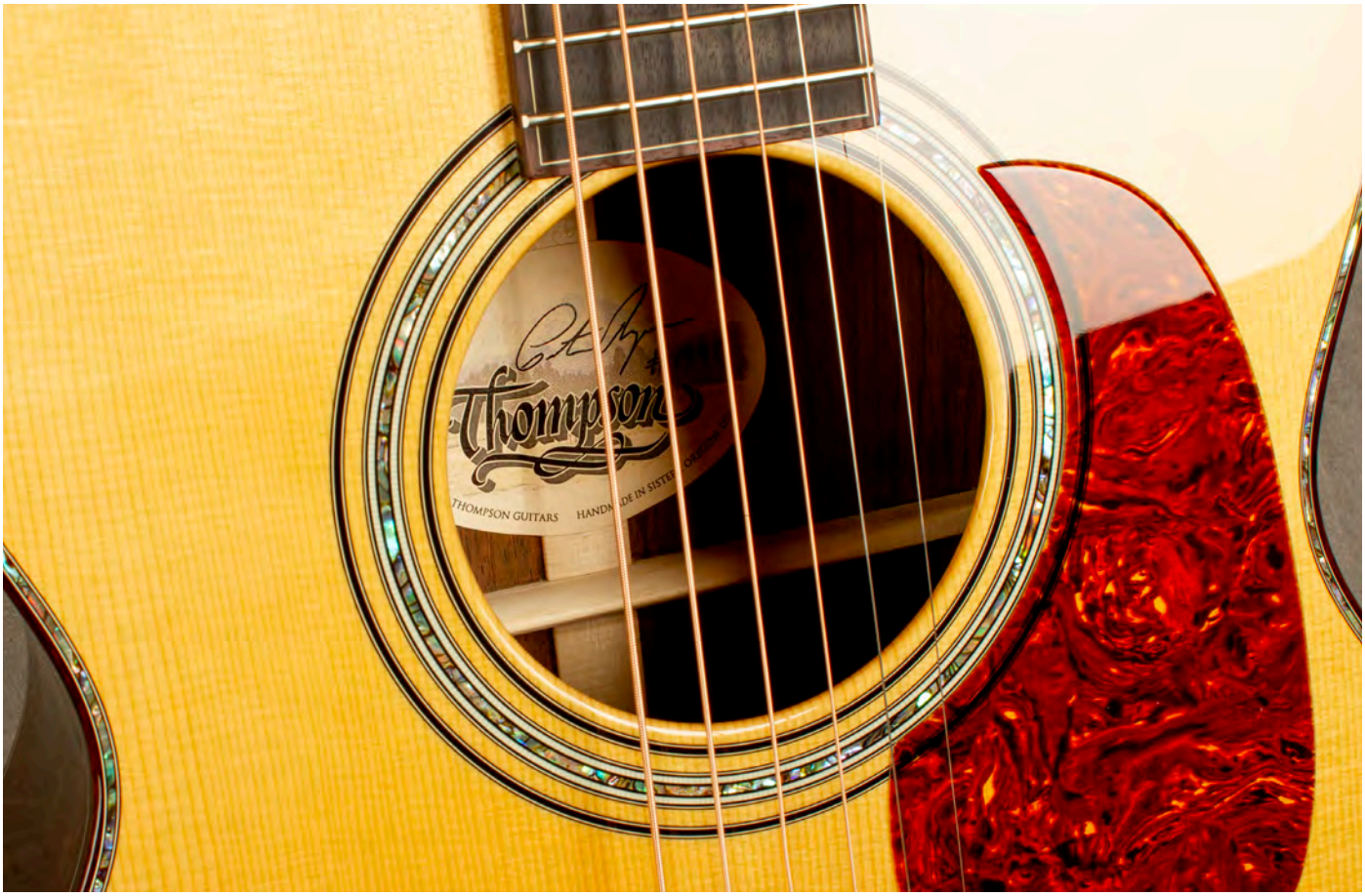
May/June 2020
Volume 30, No. 6, Issue 322

On the Cover
Reverend Gary Davis

Photograph
Ronald D. Cohen Collection #20239, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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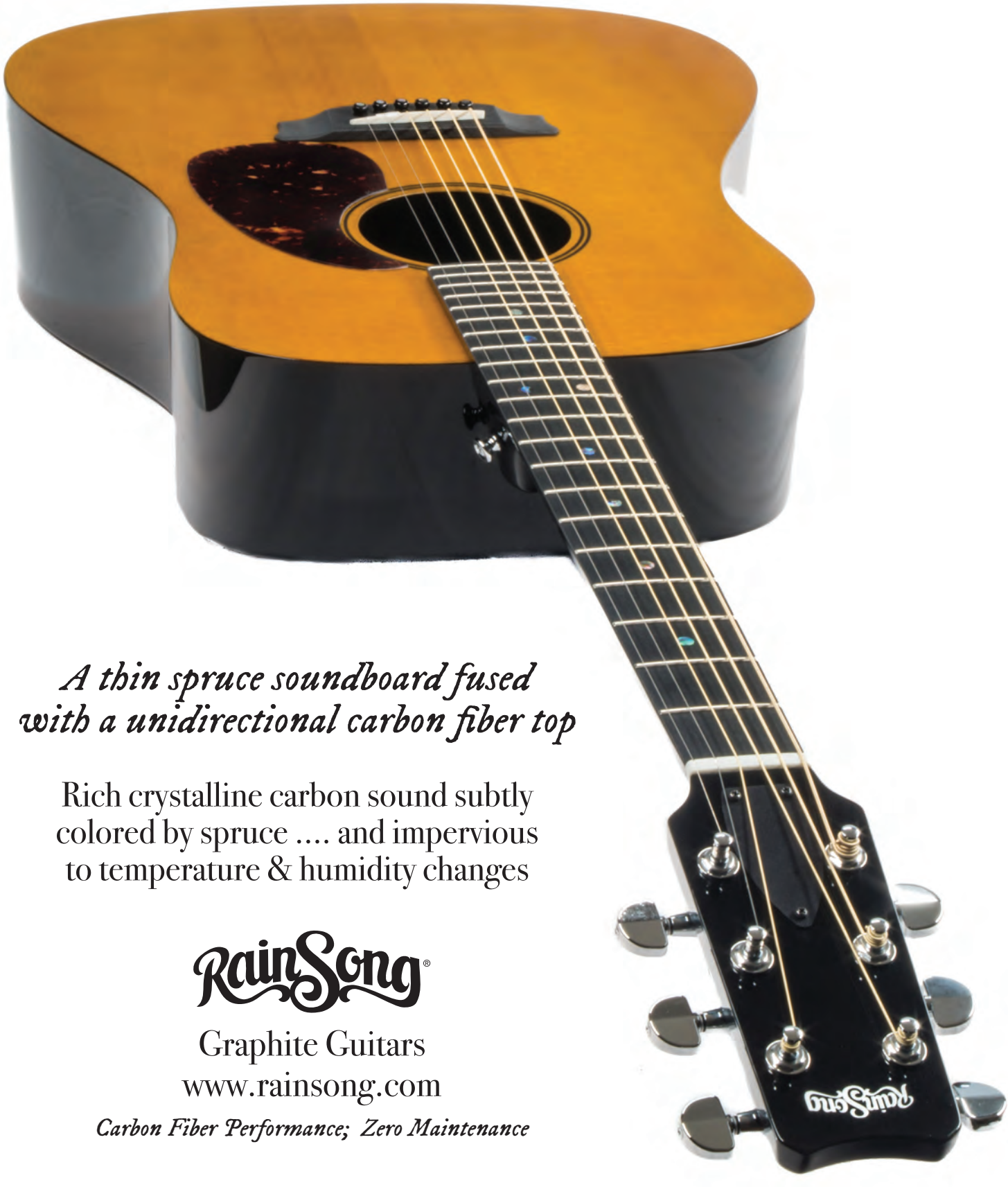


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THE FRONT PORCH

Steve James with Howard "Louie Bluie" Armstrong



PHIL HUNGATE

Just as this is a golden era of lutherie, so too is it a golden era of guitar instruction. Paul McCartney tells the story of riding across Liverpool on a bus in the early 1960s, just to learn a B7 chord from someone who reportedly knew how to play one. Nowadays, of course, the knowledge is widely available—a quick Google search will yield a diagram for a B7 or any imaginable type of chord, in various voicings and inversions, all around the fretboard.

It's also easy to find a wealth of acoustic blues guitar methods and transcriptions, whether in printed or digital form, giving a window into the thinking of players from Robert Johnson to Reverend Gary Davis to Brownie McGhee. But in the scheme of things, it wasn't all that long ago that guitarists were confounded as to how this music, heard mostly on 78 rpm recordings, was created.

In the 1960s, some young musicians sought to learn how to play blues guitar directly from aging, rediscovered pioneers. Ernie Hawkins was only 18 in 1965 when he set out from his hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in search of the Reverend Gary Davis in New York City. Hawkins connected with Davis and studied with the bluesman on and off for five years. Since then, Hawkins has passed on what he learned through a series of book and videos for Mel Bay and Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop.

In this issue, Hawkins gives an overview of Davis' style, touching on his masterpieces like "Samson and Delilah" and his arrangement of Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag," with an accompanying 50-minute video on *AG*'s website. It's a fascinating lesson with plenty to offer any player, regardless of stylistic inclinations. In addition, Hawkins breaks down Davis' "Cocaine Blues," a key source of inspiration for guitarists from Bob Dylan to Keith Richards.

Happy Traum, Stefan Grossman, Rory Block, and Steve James also came up in the 1960s and likewise connected with elderly bluesmen in New York and elsewhere. Like Hawkins, these prominent roots guitarists have for many years shared their firsthand knowledge through their albums and instructional methods, helping make prewar blues styles common practice on the acoustic guitar. Here, Traum, Grossman, Block, and James reminisce on the 1960s blues revival, in which they played such a vital role.

Elsewhere, Pete Madsen teaches three different ways to play a 12-bar blues in C, inspired by the legendary blues guitarists, and writer Kate Koenig connects with Audrey Bartlett, the lead builder behind Waterloo Guitars, which are inspired by budget models produced in the 1930s—a significant decade for prewar blues.

In a different direction, bossa nova gained worldwide popularity in the '60s, and one of the most well-known bossa numbers, "The Girl from Ipanema," happens to have been one of the most requested songs in *AG* reader surveys. So in this issue you'll find a transcription of a classic chord-melody arrangement, recorded in 1965 by the nylon-string great Charlie Byrd. Among the other transcriptions and arrangements in a range of genres, be sure to check out "Guitar Peace," Billy Strings' Indian-inspired excursion in open-D tuning, published for the first time here.

Feel free to email me with your thoughts on the issue—or a request to learn any chord shape.

—Adam Perlmutter
Adam.Perlmutter@Stringletter.com



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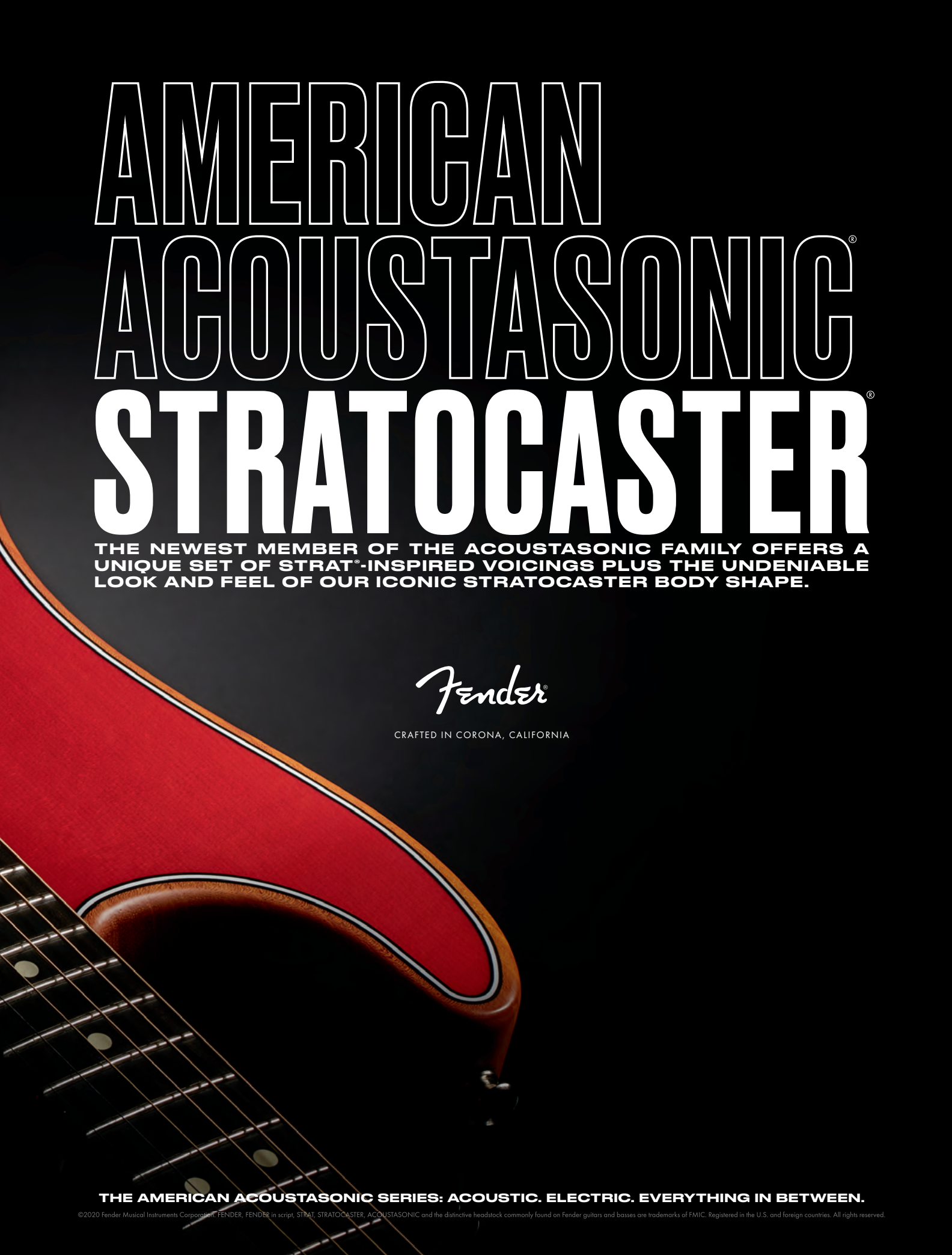
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Jeff Mangan's dream Martin

In the March/April issue, we asked the AG *community to tell us about their dream instrument, the one they'd choose if they could own any guitar in the world—new or vintage, stock or custom. As you'll see in the responses below, one lucky reader is already living his dream...*

DREAM GUITARS

I saw this Martin guitar at the Phoenix Musical Instrument Museum and was completely taken with its beauty. Being a Martin fan, I am confident it has a most incredible voice. My only additional wish would be for it to be left-handed, as that is how I play!

—Jeff Mangan, via email

I have some great guitars, vintage and custom, current and new, but the best is a custom Fylde made by Roger Bucknall in Penrith, England. Not only is he the best guitar craftsman, he's also one of the funniest!

—David Motley, Moneta, Virginia

1888 Antonio de Torres.

—Ed Goldman, via email

One of Aviva Steigmeyer's handmade 1920s-era parlor guitars from the Preservation Guitar Company ... simply beautiful.

—Jamie Etherington, Elinbank, Victoria, Australia

Mine would be a Martin 00-17 Authentic 1931.

—Godfrey Toft, via email

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— Eddie "on the scene and living clean" McKechnie, via email



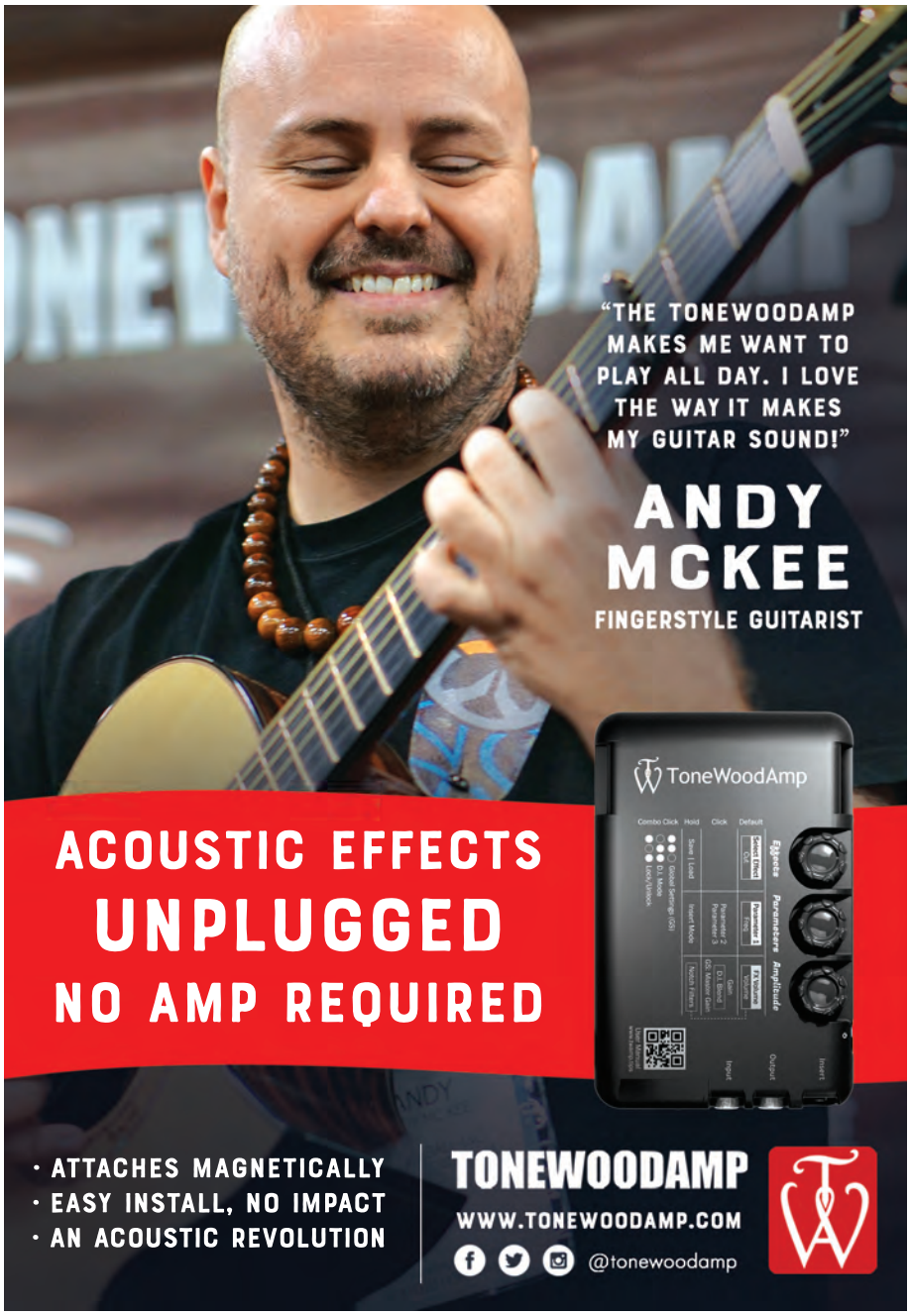
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Railroad Earth guitarist Todd Sheaffer on his influences, his Martins, and more

BY BLAIR JACKSON

Railroad Earth has been variously categorized as "jamgrass," "progressive bluegrass," and "newgrass," and lumped in with the likes of Yonder Mountain String Band, Greensky Bluegrass, Trampled by Turtles, and the Infamous Stringdusters—all of whom are completely different from one another. None of those labels and comparisons capture the scope of Railroad Earth's music. Yes, the group can play stompin' bluegrass with explosive acoustic guitar, mandolin, and banjo throwdowns. But they can also drift in psychedelic spaces reminiscent of the Grateful Dead, serve up jaunty Americana that comes on a straight line from The Band and other progenitors of rootsy rock, and hit some deep country spots.

The latest album from this perennially touring group, *All for the Song*, is a typically eclectic offering, with solid songwriting and plenty of fine pickin' up and down from the versatile, 20-year-old New Jersey-based outfit: Todd Sheaffer (acoustic guitar, most lead vocals, principal songwriter), Tim Carbone (violin), John Skehan (mandolin, etc.), Andrew Altman (bass), and Carey Harman (percussion)—aided on tour by Mike Robinson (banjo, acoustic, electric, and pedal steel guitars) and Matt Slocum (keyboards). This is their first album since the 2018 death from cancer of multi-instrumentalist founding member Andy Goessling, and not surprisingly that loss colored the recording sessions, which took place in New Orleans with producer and guitar great Anders Osborne. Sheaffer notes it was a conscious choice to make a "destination record": "We wanted to go away. After Andy passed, the five of us decided we wanted the intimate shared experience of getting together on some new music and bonding as a group again. So, we went to New Orleans with Anders producing, and it was a great thing for us to do, to leave the distractions of all the things that go on at home and reconnect with each other."

The result of their ten days in New Orleans is one of their strongest albums to date, one that is tinged with the darkness of "heartache and loss," as Sheaffer put it, but also bursts of optimism. Not surprisingly, Goessling's spirit infuses the record, and he actually appears on one song—Tim Carbone's evocative "Drifting"—on which Carbone, Skehan, and Sheaffer each get to solo a little against a track their fallen brother had recorded.


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But today we're here to talk guitars with Sheaffer, who is definitely one of the most interesting players in the contemporary progressive-acoustic band scene—a colorful and imaginative soloist who does wonders with a very simple setup.

I'm curious to know what your gateway to guitar was. What was your first guitar and what kind of stuff did you play on it?
I think my first guitar was a Guild dreadnought that my parents bought me when I was kid. I wish I still had it! It was probably a great guitar, but I sold it somewhere along the way. I think I learned on that, but pretty quickly started playing electric. I had a nice [Gibson] SG until one day when I was fooling around with some friends, wrestling and stuff, and we landed on it and cracked the neck off of it.

It was a late-'60s SG that would probably be worth a lot of money now. Another one I wish I still had! At the time, I gave it to my friend Tom, and years later when I saw him, I asked, "What ever happened to that SG?" "Oh, my mom threw it away because it was broken." If he'd fixed it, it would probably be worth $12,000 or something!

That's the saddest story I've ever heard.
It is! [*Laughs*] I also had a Les Paul that I played, and I had an acoustic guitar that wasn't real good. I can't even remember what it was. I always played gigs and was making money at it, but right out of college—I went to Columbia University in New York City—I got a gig playing for a folk singer named Jack Hardy. I auditioned to play in his band, to be the harmony singer and second guitarist. He said, "I really like you. I'd like you to join my band. We're going on tour in Europe in a couple of weeks. You've got the gig, but you're not playing that guitar! *Here's* what you're playing," and he handed me an incredible Martin D-18 that he had gotten from John Denver; he had lived in in Colorado. That was my introduction to Martin guitars, and for the length of the time that I was in his band, which was probably three years, I played his D-18, which is still probably the best guitar I've ever played in my life. Then, when I started doing my own music, I got my own Martin, which was a 00-18, and along the way I started playing 000s, too. I play a 00-18 now with Railroad Earth. It's my second one. The first one just got beat to hell on the road, and I had to retire it.

What's your electronics setup like? You have that nice clean tone that sounds both acoustic and electric depending on the moment and what you're playing.
It's really simple. I play through a Fender Super Reverb and three Boss pedals; that's all I've ever used. I use a little delay and EQ and an overdrive for my lead stuff, straight into the amp; that's it. I actually just picked up a wonderful 1964 Fender Super that sounds amazing, but I'm not going to bring it on the road; I'm gonna use it in the studio.


COURTESY OF TODD SHEAFFER

From the beginning you've played acoustic on stage.
I've got my own kind of sound with it. Even going back to the earliest days of Frontier Homes [one of his previous groups] I played a Martin guitar through an amp. That was always my sound, 'cause I've always played in a band that's kind of a rock thing.

With Andy's passing, I had thought to, and I still might, take a dreadnought back out on the road. For a while, Andy and I both had guitars made for us by a company called Crafters of Tennessee. These were both wonderful guitars and I played that for a little bit, but the sonic textures Andy and I blended together, with me playing the smaller body Martin and him mostly playing the Crafters dreadnought—he occasionally played a Martin on a few songs, too—just sounded really good to me, and fit in well with the whole band. The Crafters was a bigger-bodied guitar with a bigger sound which blended really nicely on the parts we worked out with my guitar. With Andy gone, I thought I might try and get somewhere in between those sounds by bringing a dreadnought out on the road, but we now have other players in the band—Mike Robinson and Matt Slocum—so I'm kind of back doing what I was doing, and Mike is doing a great job covering a lot of the Andy parts.

Who were some of your guideposts as a guitarist growing up? Railroad Earth obviously has some deep roots in bluegrass, and you still hear that in a lot of songs you do, but the majority of your songs draw from many different styles. Who are some of the guitarists outside of the bluegrass world who informed your style?
Well, first of all, I'm *not* a flatpicker, you know? So with a lot of the flatpicking bluegrass stuff we play, it ends up in Mike's hands, and in the past it was in Andy's hands. That's just not something that I ever really pursued. I played a little bit, but my style is more . . . when I play a lead, it brings out

more of my influences from when I was playing electric music. A lot of people hear Jerry Garcia in my playing, and I think that's mostly in the tone more than the actual note choices. My note choices tend to be melodic. It's just the way I think: following melodies, making melodies. I've never really studied all the scales and that kind of thing. It's melodies that move my soul.

Also, though, I think I might've picked up some of that in my early days from listening to Dickey Betts. I saw the Allman Brothers more than anyone; I loved them! And Dickey Betts was an amazing melodic player. He'd get these riffs going and keep them going and develop them—and that's kind of what I try to do, too. So, he was a pretty strong influence.

In the bluegrass world I absolutely love David Bromberg. But in general, I've never been the type who would sit down and study someone's style and try and cop it. I always just played my own music.

'When I play a lead, it brings out more of my influences from when I was playing electric music.'

What are some of the other guitars you own? There seems to be a trend towards smaller instruments in some circles.

Really? Well, good, because I own a few of those! [*Laughs*] I have a really great koa one that was made by a guy named Paul Berger, and I have two other Paul Berger guitars. Peter Rowan has a couple of them as well. He made them for us several years ago. [Berger died in 2015.]

Paul had this incredible stash of wood that [C.F. Martin & Co. CEO] Chris Martin had given him. Paul had worked for Martin for many, many years and Chris really liked him. In fact, Paul did the restorations on Martin's museum collection. But eventually he decided he'd had enough of the Northeast and he wanted to go somewhere warm so he moved down to Florida, where he was from originally. But before he left Martin, Chris gifted him an incredible stash of some of the best wood that Martin had from the '20s and '30s. And Paul took that and became this amazing [independent] guitar maker. So, I have three of those and I love them—the koa parlor, a D-28, and a really cool 00. AG

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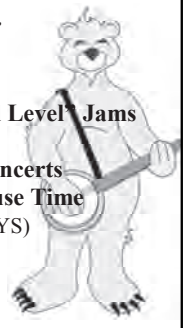


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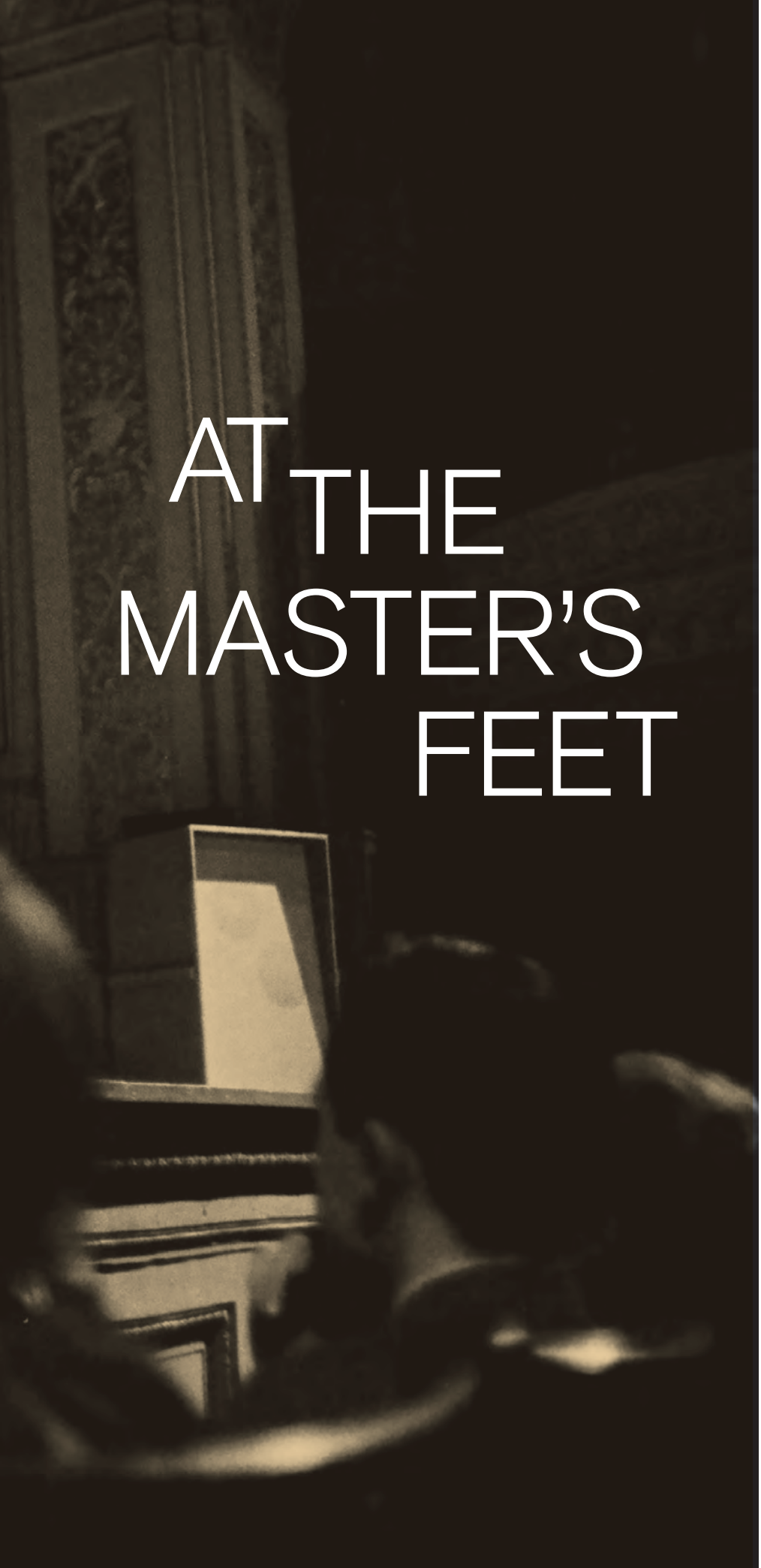
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Reverend Gary Davis
performing in the late 1950s



AT THE MASTER'S FEET

What I learned from my time in the 1960s with the Reverend Gary Davis

BY ERNIE HAWKINS

In the summer of 1965, a day after graduating from high school, I moved from my hometown of Pittsburgh to New York, on a mission to find the legendary blues guitarist Reverend Gary Davis. I took a job in Midtown Manhattan, earning $52.50 a week, and found Davis' number, AX 1-7609, in the New York City phone book. Before long I had eased into the after-work routine of visiting Davis at his home, in the Bronx, where he would give me guitar lessons for five dollars, and his wife, Annie, would insist I stay for dinner.

In the basement where he taught, Davis and I talked, played, and became conspiratorial. He always seemed to know how I was feeling, and speaking low, caused me to lean in close to him. There was so much magic wrapped up in the man and his music, with its mysterious moving bass lines, its enchanting melodies, and its wordless messages from the past. In sitting there with Davis, as I was fortunate to do on and off for five years, I received a lifetime of musical insights.

Gary D. Davis was born in Laurens, South Carolina, in 1896 and became blind as an infant. His was the story of a legendary talent that endured persistent grinding poverty. Davis scuffed around the South, landing in Durham, North Carolina, where he met and taught Blind Boy Fuller, who would become a heavyweight bluesman in his own right. In 1933 he was ordained as a Baptist minister there.

Davis was captured at his prime on the 14 brilliant tunes he recorded for the American Record Corporation in 1934, before he became disenchanted with the music industry and survived by playing wherever he could, his income supplemented by welfare benefits. In the late 1940s, as the blues scene petered out in

Durham, Davis moved to New York. By the ’50s, he was a fixture in the burgeoning folk scene, playing on the streets, as was his habit, before teaching and playing clubs. When acts like Peter, Paul & Mary and the Grateful Dead began recording his songs, he became financially secure for the first time in his life, buying a house and a car and enjoying long-deserved international fame.

Davis, who is widely celebrated as a genius of blues fingerpicking, was in fact largely curious about music in general. With his guitar at hand, he was known to pass by shops with speakers out on the sidewalk, learning the music right on the spot. He had a “phonographic” memory and mastered many idioms, from gospel, blues, ragtime, and early jazz to minstrel songs, novelty tunes, and old-time country hits. In this lesson, I’ll give you a sampling of what Davis taught me about his music in these styles—and what I’m still working out 55 years later.

Reverend Gary Davis entertains guests at a party for his 63rd birthday, in 1959.



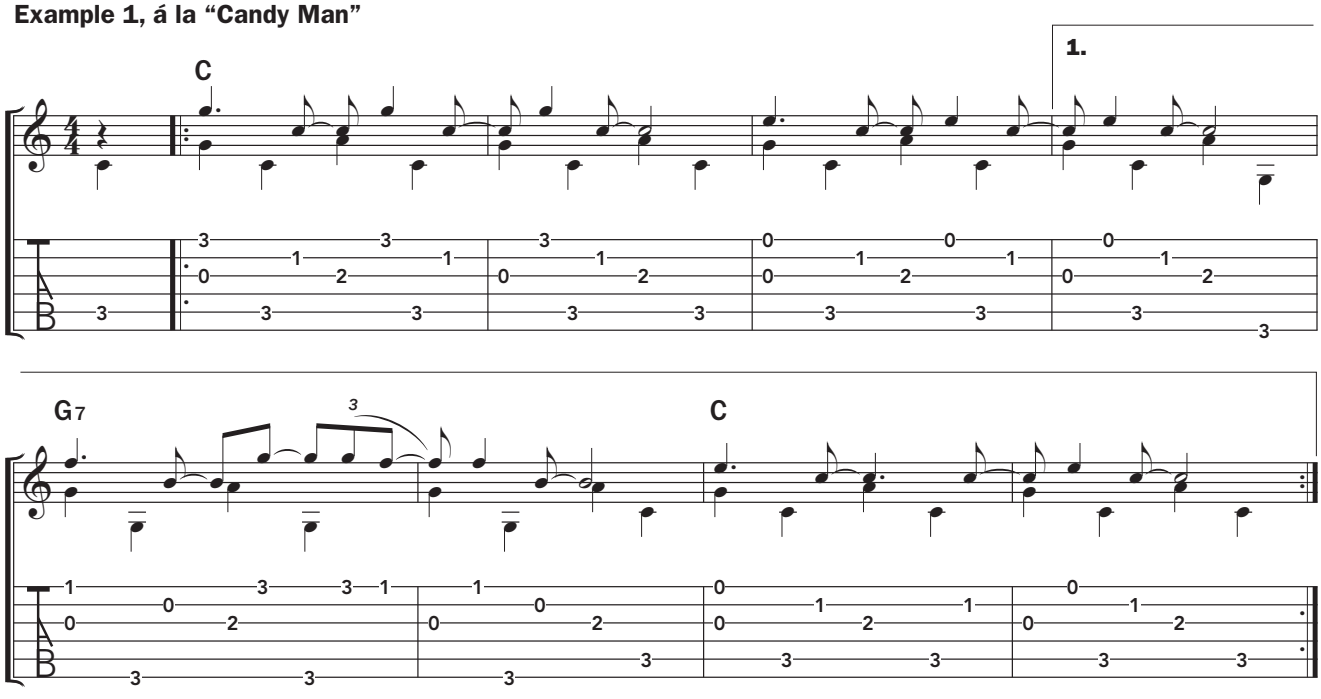
A MATTER OF KEY IMPORTANCE

The most interesting things about Davis’ playing, at least to my ear, are the way his approach varied substantially within different keys, and the nonstandard details that abound in his music. For an example in C major, take “Candy Man”—an amazing, perfect song in the first position that sounds simple but is actually quite tricky, as Davis reverses the customary order of the bass notes. As shown in **Example 1**, you would expect a C bass note on beat 1 of the first full bar, but instead Davis plays a higher G. He uses this same displacement technique on songs like “You Got the Pocketbook, I Got the Key,” and to my knowledge it’s otherwise unheard of in American guitar.

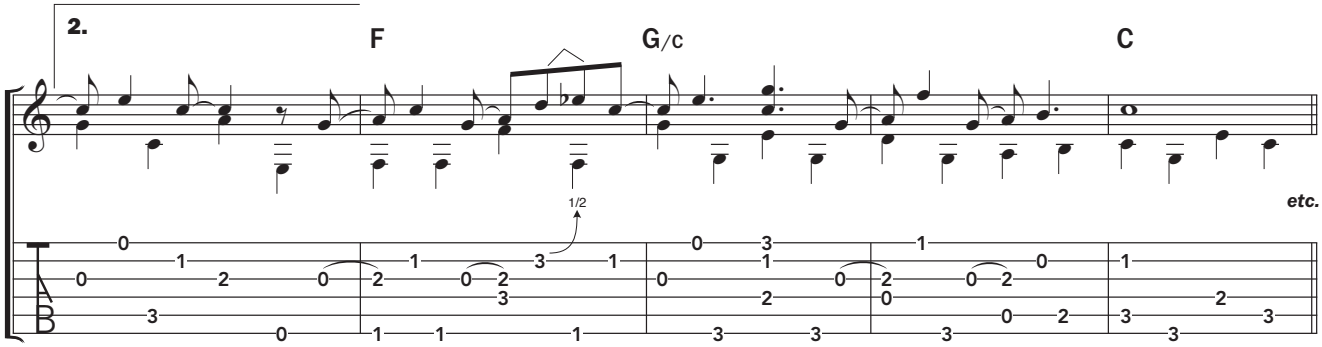
Also in C, “I Belong to the Band” is likewise mainly in the first position, an economical choice that allows Davis to play contrapuntal bass figures. This is another example of Davis breaking all the rules, straying from steady bass lines in favor of lower voices that add a unique counterpoint to the melody. In **Example 2**, check out how the bass weaves in and out to complement the melody while pushing it along. It’s brilliant.

Davis had a kind of chord/melody approach to the key of G major, as heard on songs like “Goin’ to Sit Down on the Banks of the River” and “Will There Be Stars in My Crown.” But “Samson and Delilah” is really his masterpiece in G. It’s got everything: fast runs, deft counterpoint, and singing guitar. **Example 3** is similar to what Davis played in the introduction to “Samson”—a fistful of chords, followed by a line that culminates high on the neck, at the 15th-fret G. After the intro, Davis’ active accompaniment has a wonderful singing quality,

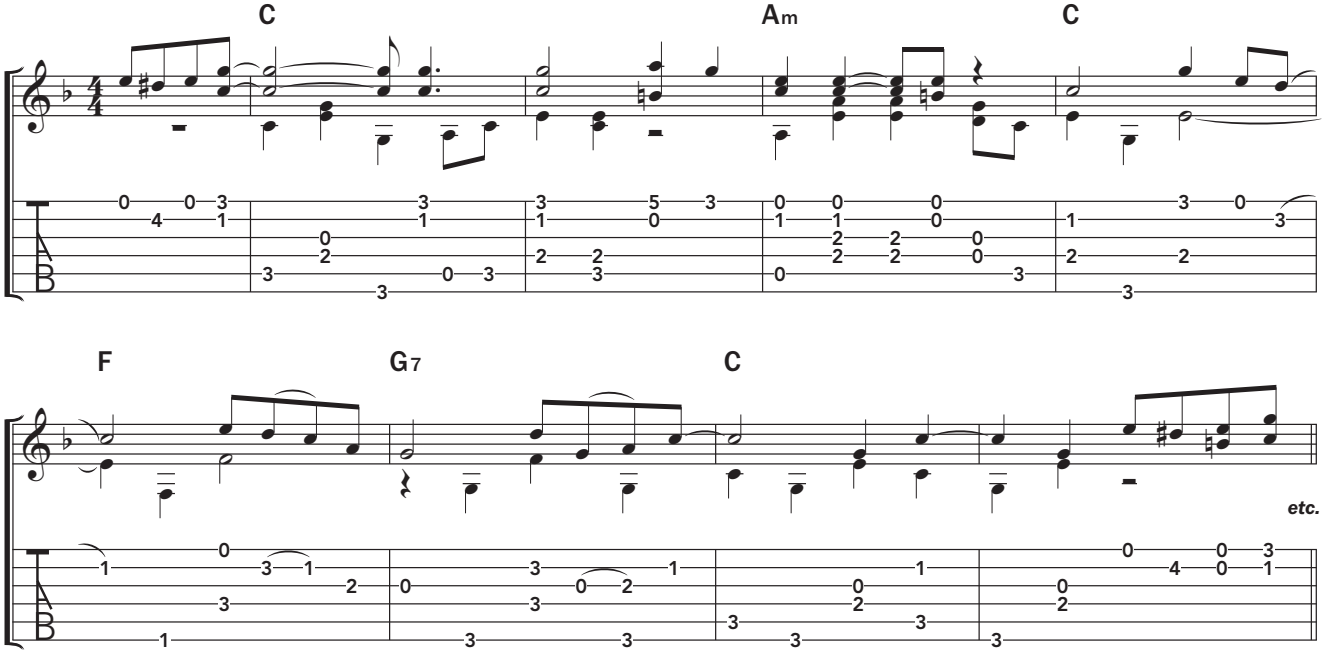
Example 1, á la “Candy Man”



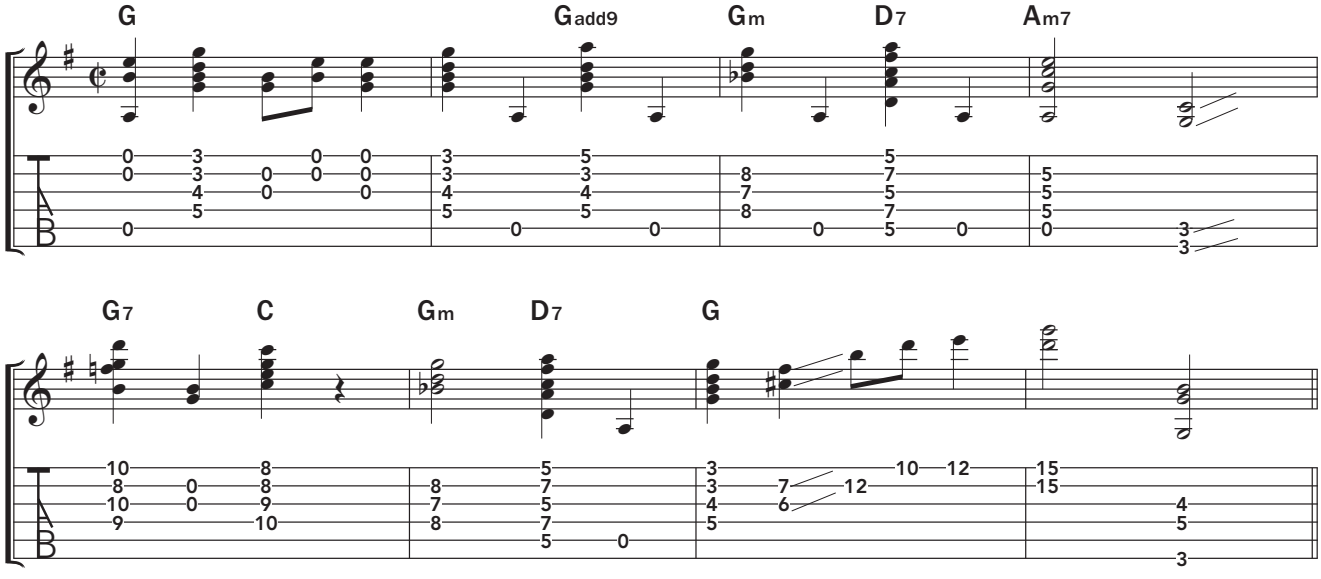
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Example 2, á la "I Belong to the Band"



Example 3, á la "Samson and Delilah"



deeply and beautifully integrated with his vocals. Here the guitarist plays fingerpicked fills with subtle textural effects, like the fifth-fret G pitted against the open G string, as in the third measure of **Example 4**.

BUCKING THE TRADITION

Davis was no stranger to the folk tradition—witness examples like "Buck Dance" and "Devil's Dream." On the latter selection, kind of a novelty tune, Davis plays a pretty straightforward alternating bass part in the key of F, as depicted in **Example 5**, above which he negotiates the I chord (F) with a series of hammer-ons from the minor third (A♭) to the major (A). But in the second part of the tune (**Example 6**), which modulates to the relative key of D minor, Davis drops the alternating bass in favor of a more syncopated part. At the second ending, note the unusual melodic choices of the notes A♭ and E♭, returning to the more consonant F chord on the last beat.

Atypical for a blues guitarist, Davis generally disparaged open tunings and slide playing—he thought it was too easy and anybody could do it. And while about 99.9 percent of his songs were in standard tuning, "Whistlin' Blues" shows Davis' own original take on slide guitar in an alternate tuning. It's in open D6—low to high, D A D F♯ A B. The song is a talking blues in which Davis plays this lovely open chord while he riffs about traveling on the road and encountering a woman who plays boogie-woogie piano. He portrays her piano similarly to the music shown in **Example 7**, playing the I chord (D6) by placing the slide across strings 1–4 at fret 12, the IV chord (G6/D, not shown in notation) at fret 5 and the V chord (A6/D, also not in notation) at fret 7.

Whatever the context, Davis loved to play guitar parts involving simultaneous voices. "Fast Fox Trot," having a melody, interior line, and bass part, is perhaps one of the best and clearest examples of this approach. As a teenager, I was baffled trying to learn the piece off the record. I could hear and play the individual parts, but just couldn't figure out how Davis put everything together. The first time I met him, I asked him to play it. He just chuckled and hardly moved his fingers while playing all the lines in a perfectly distinct manner. It was a revelation to me. Be sure to listen for the different voices, especially the middle one, when you try the tune (**Example 8**).

The author with Reverend Gary Davis at Carnegie Music Hall in Pittsburgh, c. 1969.



COURTESY OF ERNIE HAWKINS

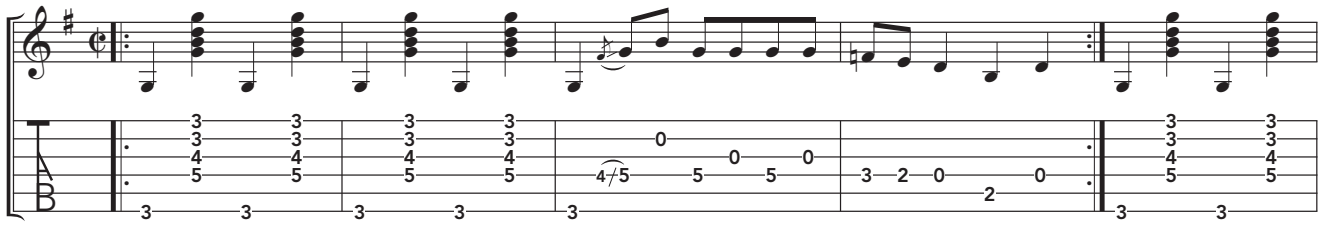
TECHNIQUE AND IMAGINATION

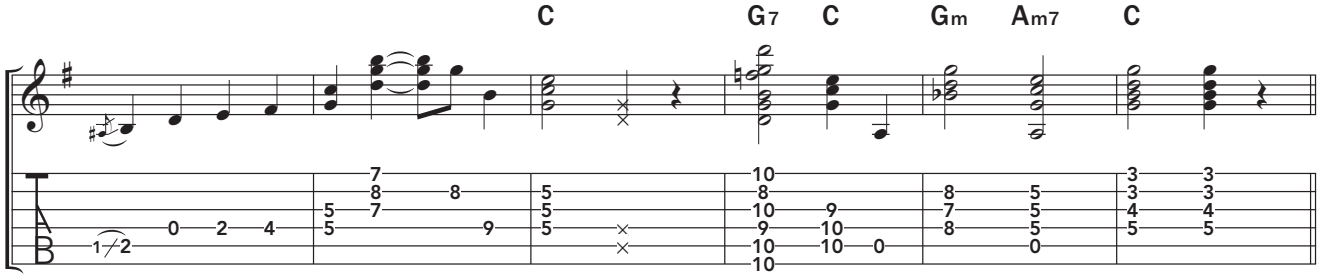
Given Davis' penchant for contrapuntal movement on guitar, it was only natural that he took to ragtime arrangements. Davis was certainly a rarity among folk guitarists in that he had the chops and musical imagination to pull off this impressive feat. He turned Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" into a guitar masterpiece, infusing it with his patented techniques—a key inspiration for later ragtime guitarists like Eric Schoenberg and David Laibman. Davis did this by boiling the piece down to thematic essences that he could adapt to his style of playing.

The first section of "Maple Leaf Rag" (**Example 9**) involves a diminished roll, answered by a bluesy single-note line, which reappears in the second section. Davis gets even more inventive in a subsequent section, as shown in **Example 10**, where he answers an E7 chord with a colorful voicing—an A chord with the third (C♯) in the bass and the addition of
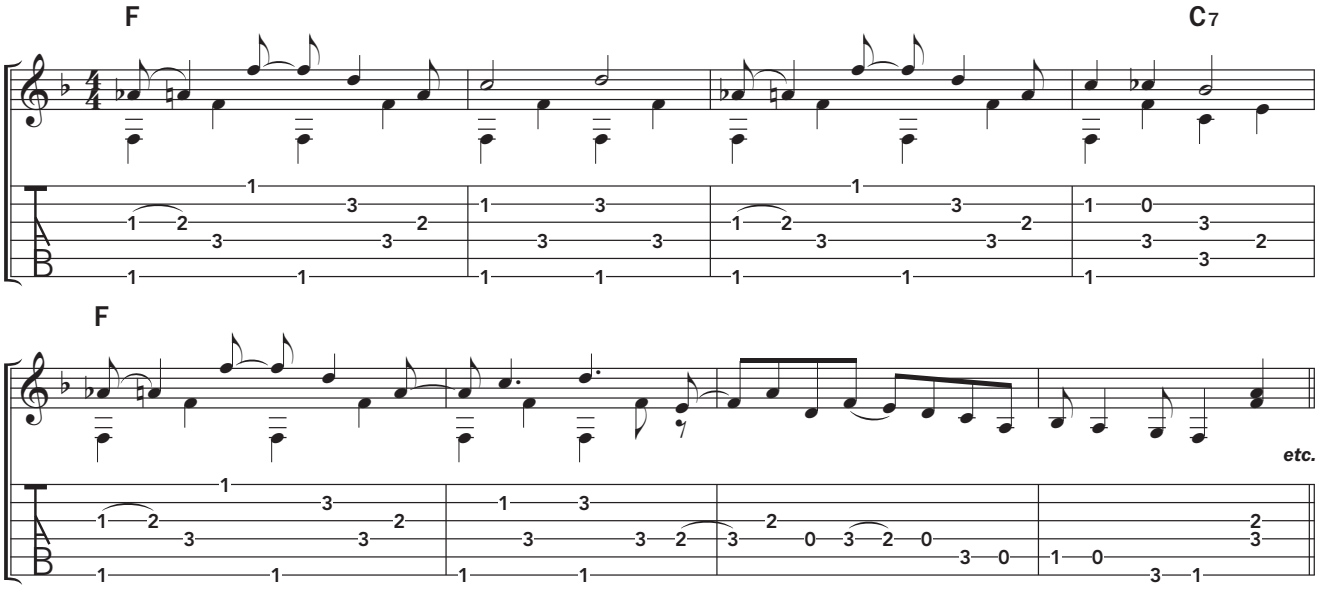
Example 4, á la "Samson and Delilah"

G

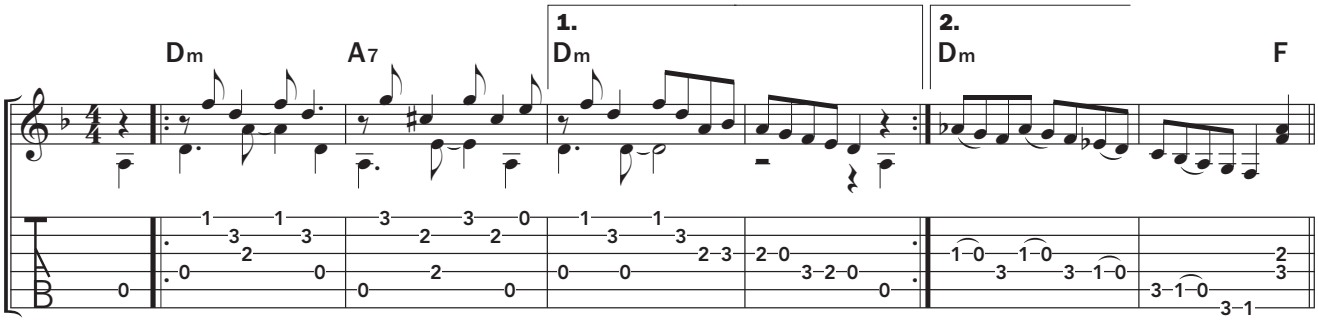




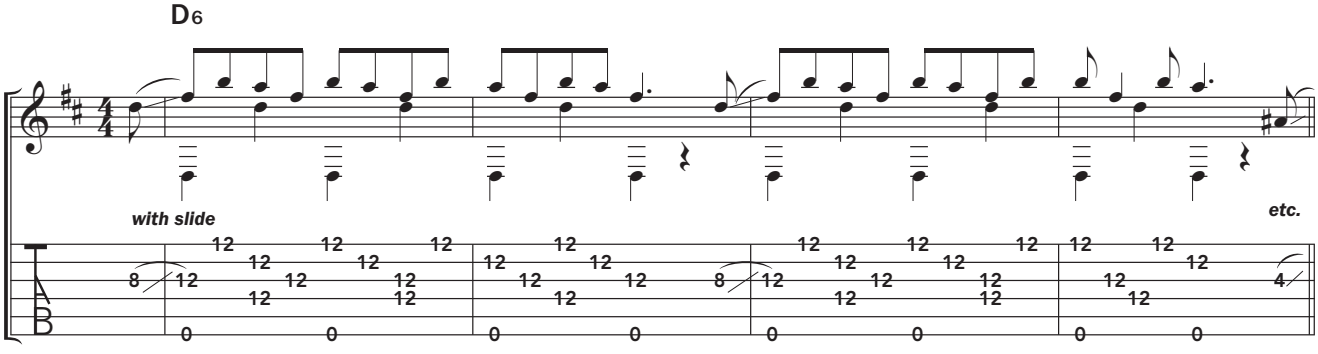
Example 5, á la "Devil's Dream"



Example 6, á la "Devil's Dream"



Example 7, á la "Whistlin' Blues"
Tuning: D A D F♯ A B
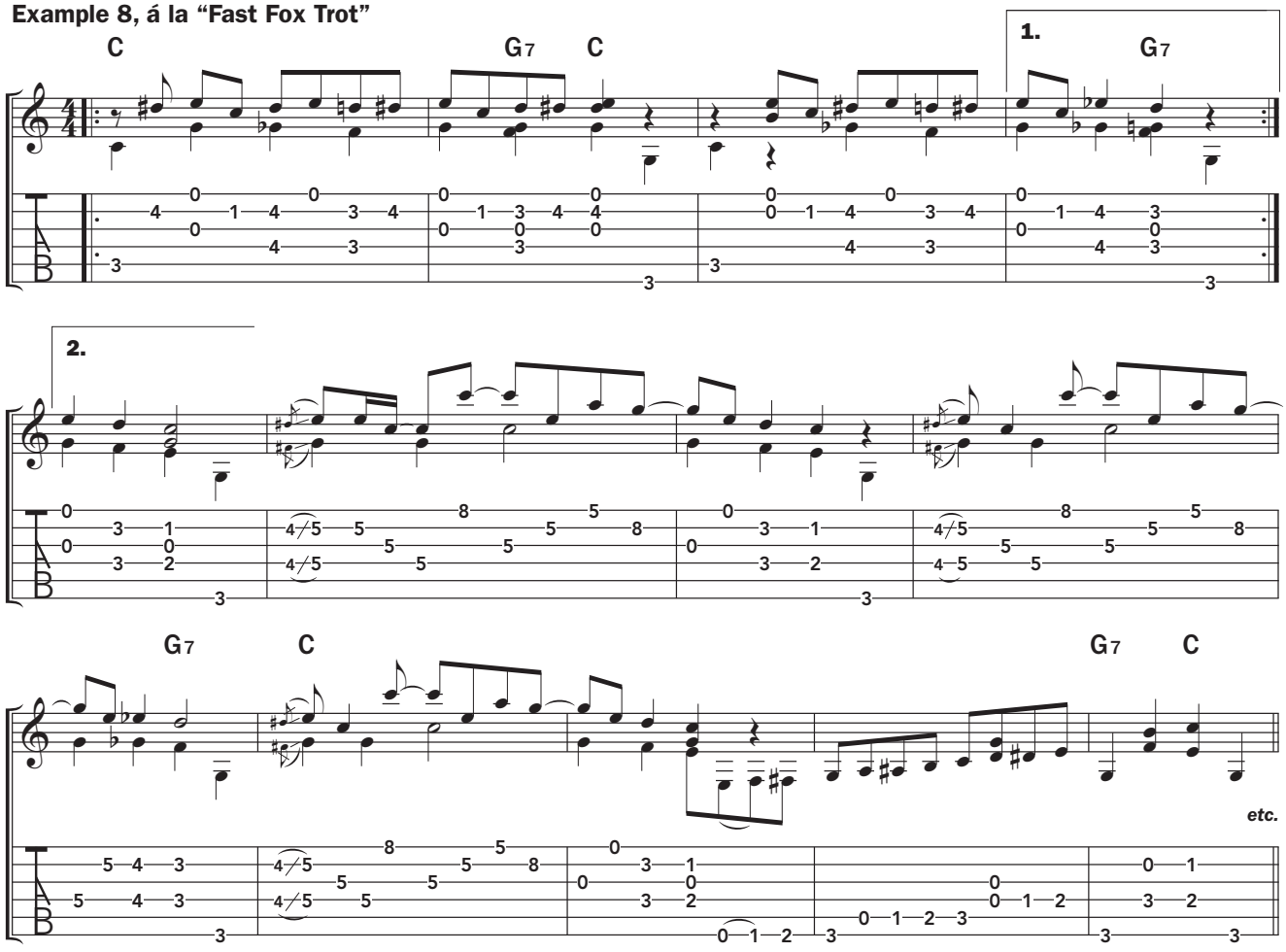


the raised fourth (D♯). Check out how the D♯, played on string 2, fret 4, rubs against the open E string. Davis' deep knowledge of the fretboard is apparent as he travels up the neck for the series of arpeggios and block chords demonstrated in **Example 11**.

More than just a ragtime or blues guitarist, Davis was a true improviser. Like the legendary jazz pianist Thelonious Monk, he could work through a spontaneously imagined theme, never losing sight of the structure, spinning out verse after brilliant verse. This high-level skill is apparent throughout Davis' work, and especially on "Slow Drag" (also known as "Cincinnati Flow Rag"), a masterpiece of 1920s-style jazz fingerpicking guitar, with its contrapuntal textures, sophisticated structure, and improvisation along the length of the fretboard.

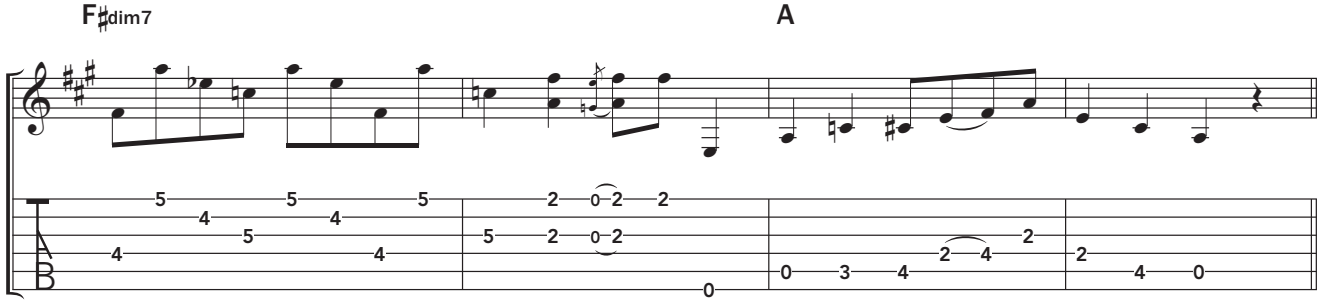
Since the beginning of time, music has been mystery and magic, the deepest source of human imagination. The archetypal blind seer emerged to give voice to that imagination. Once essential to the social-religious order, this mythic figure, this Homer, has tragically all but disappeared from our world. But Reverend Gary Davis, in all his earthy, profound, and epic reality, was one such mystic, and I see myself as having been simply blessed, sitting there at the feet of a master.

Based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Ernie Hawkins has been playing and teaching old blues, jazz, and country songs for decades. For his instructional videos and books on Reverend Gary Davis and other blues legends, visit erniehawkins.com or guitarvideos.com.

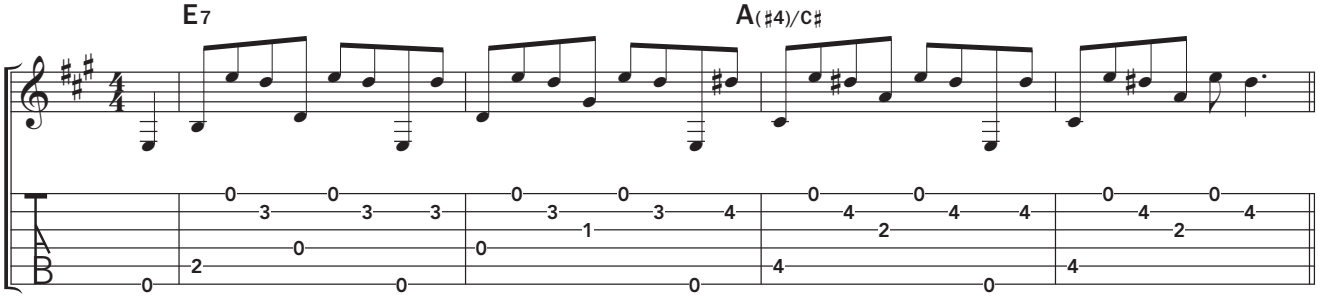
Example 8, á la "Fast Fox Trot"



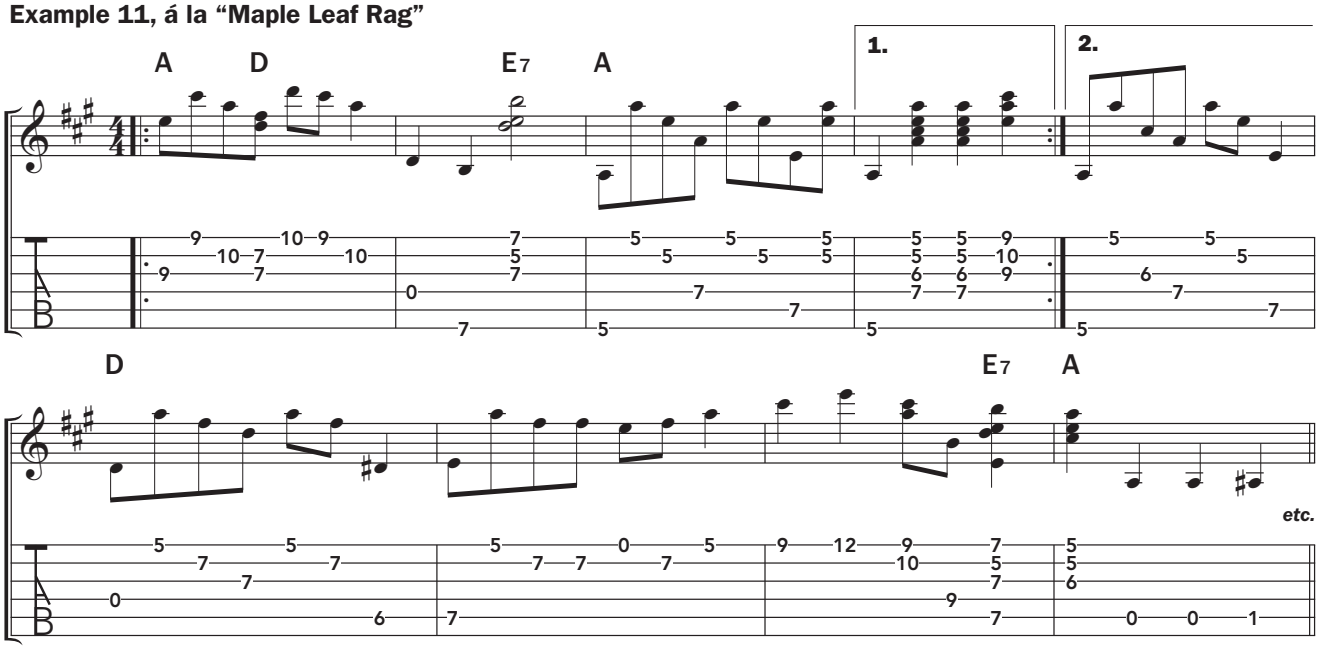
Example 9, á la "Maple Leaf Rag"



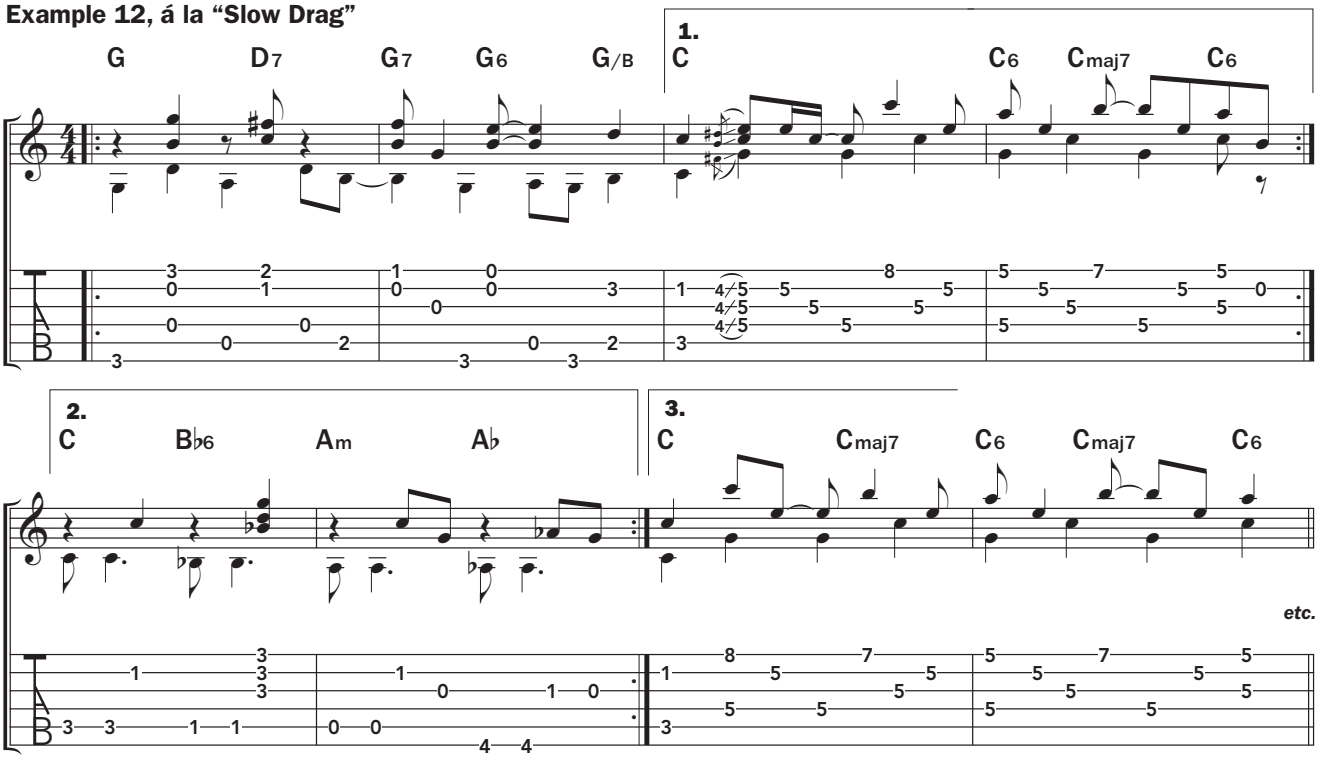
Example 10, á la "Maple Leaf Rag"

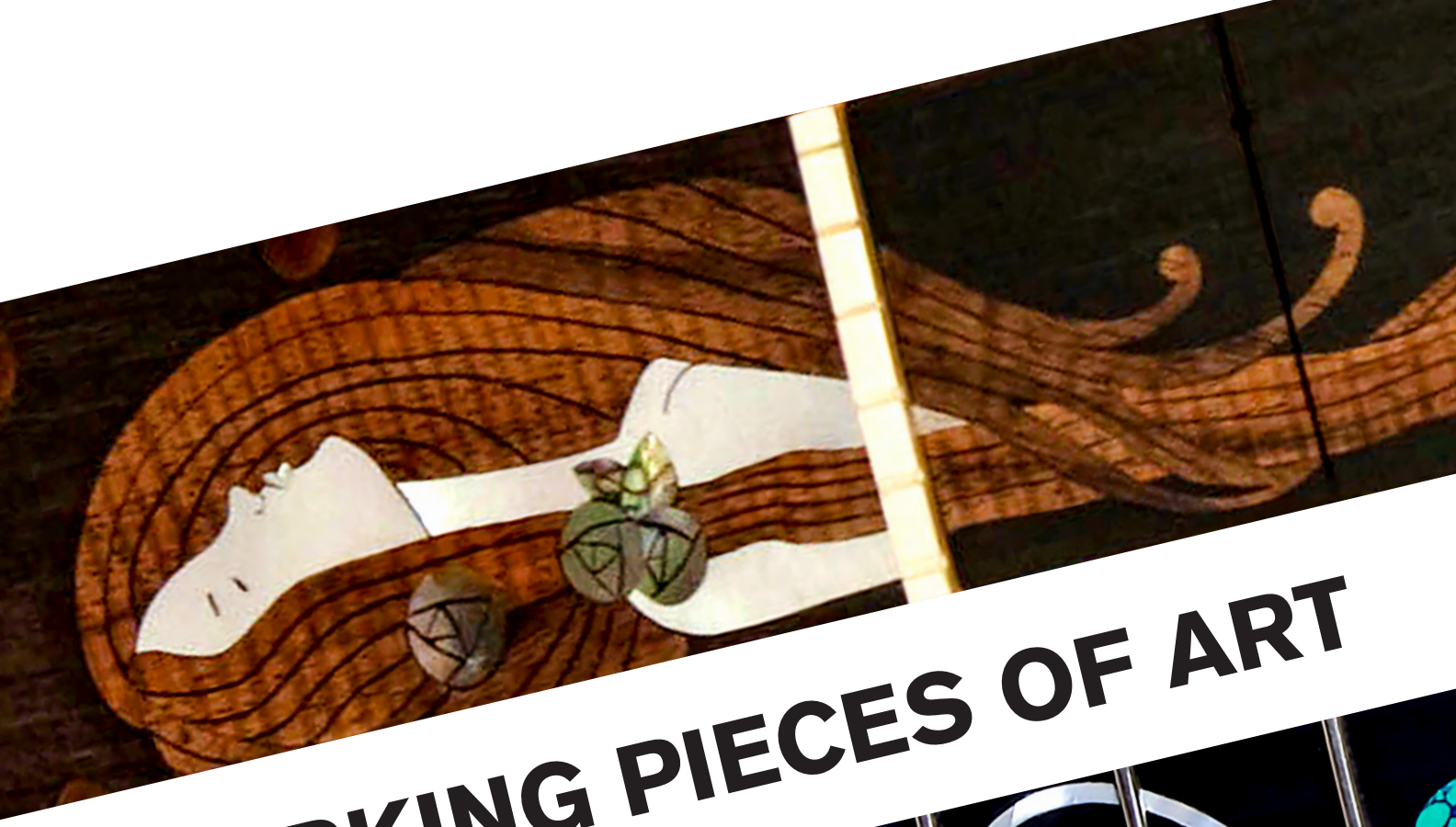


Example 11, á la "Maple Leaf Rag"



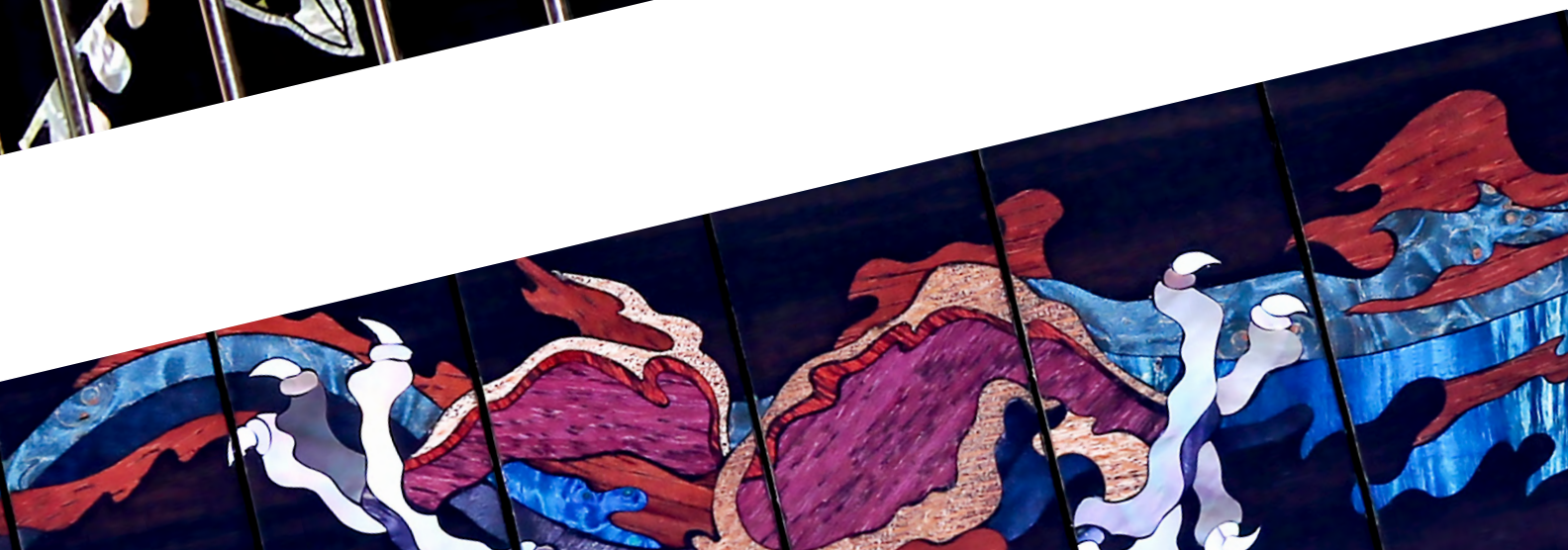
Example 12, á la "Slow Drag"





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Personalized inlays add a one-of-a-kind touch to a special guitar

BY GREG OLWELL



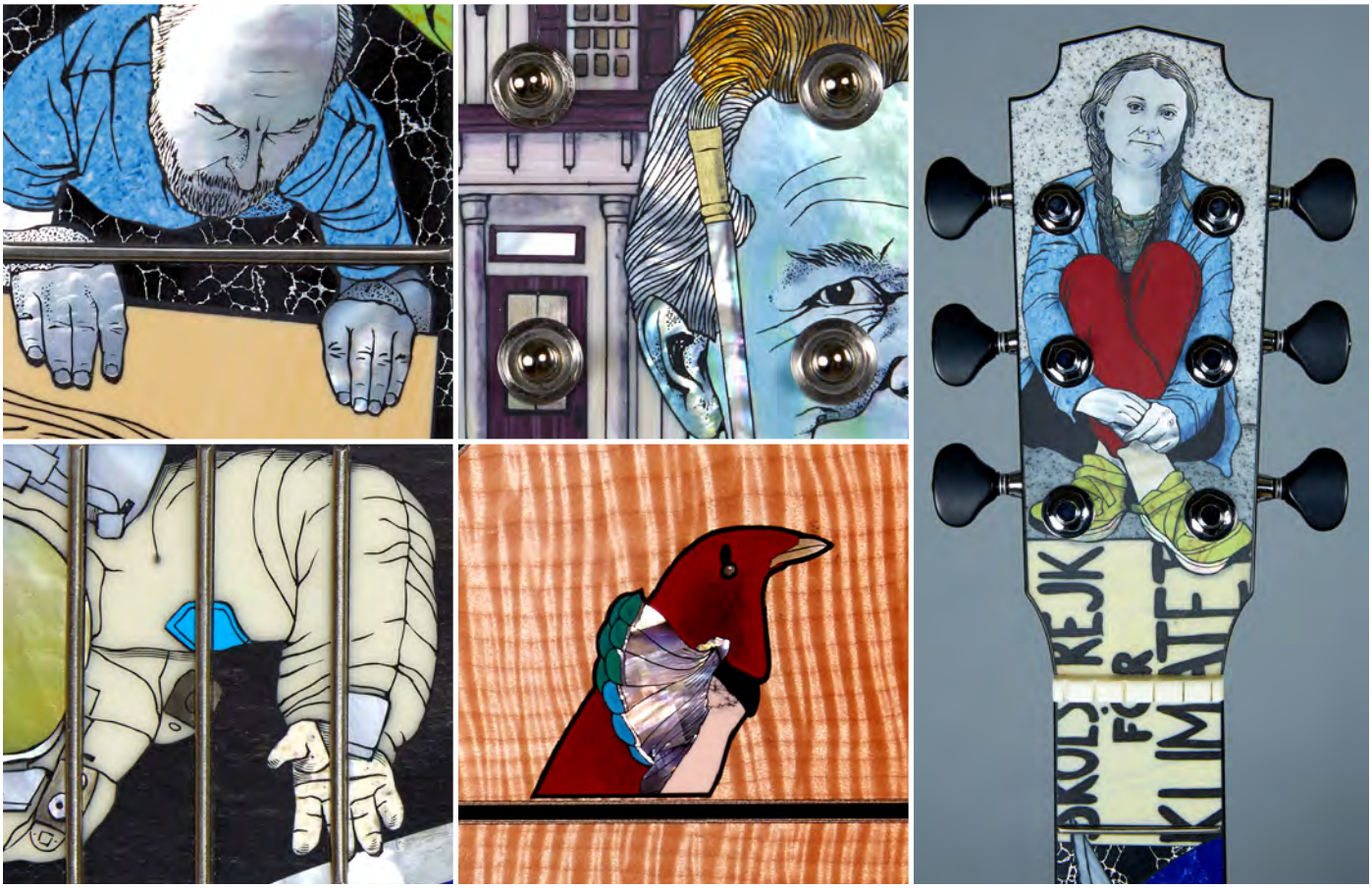
TOP: COURTESY OF KATHY WINGERT

MIDDLE: NAOMI FINLAY, COURTESY OF GRIT LASKIN

BOTTOM: COURTESY OF LARRY ROBINSON

JIMMIE RODGERS SHOWS OFF HIS CUSTOM MARTIN
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William 'Grit' Laskin



NAOMI FINLAY, COURTESY OF GRIT LASKIN

Jimmie Rodgers was already a major recording star by the time he appeared in the short film *The Singing Brakeman* in 1930, but this early talkie was the first time many folks had a chance to see and hear "the Father of Country Music." As Rodgers picks bass lines between gently strummed chords and vocals full of longing, it's easy to be drawn to the iconic name inlay on the fingerboard of the highly ornate 1927 Martin 000-45 he plays in the scene. If you didn't know who Rodgers was before you saw him with that guitar, you sure did once the pearl fingerboard lettering and special Blue Yodel headstock inlay came into focus. These features helped make this custom 000-45 the most expensive guitar Martin had made up to that point, and Rodgers' promo materials claimed that it cost an unlikely $1,500 (around $22,000 in today's money). After Rodgers' early death from tuberculosis in 1933, his widow loaned the guitar to future country music legend Ernest Tubb, who used it for the next 40 years before returning it to the family.

And while that special 000-45—which is a star attraction at the Jimmie Rodgers Museum in Meridian, Mississippi—helped to kick off the long-running tradition of namesake fingerboard inlays, it's just part of the legacy of players and makers using personalized inlays to add individuality to their acoustic guitars.

While few players opt for large, Elvis Presley-style displays across the fingerboard (see the King's 1969 Gibson Dove) these days, contemporary inlay artisans continue to find new ways to add unique touches to a player's guitar—from a relatively simple idea like an owner's name inlaid at the 12th fret to larger works that make the most of the guitar's shape. In a phone interview from his shop in rural Northern California, celebrated inlay artist Larry Robinson suggests that a personal inlay can add a unique touch to even a custom instrument. "If you spend $25,000 on an awesome guitar, you might spend a little more for a nice inlay to go with it," he says.

For many players, these personalized inlays are not about having a flashy stage guitar, but about adding embellishments—whether wild or subtle—to a special instrument that makes a guitar *their* guitar. There are many inlay artists crafting designs from small, shapely bits of shell, wood, metal, or whatever they can fit into a delicately carved pocket. I spoke with three visionary artists working in the inlay medium—Robinson, William "Grit" Laskin, and Kathy Wingert, who works closely with her daughter Jimmi Wingert on inlay projects—about the beauty that can result from a close connection between a player looking for something unique and the person who can make it happen. And more than existing as a beautifully shaped piece of glass or something to hang on a wall, these guitars are working art—tools meant to be played and enjoyed at home or on the stage.

"In my world, it's all bespoke; it doesn't matter how small it is," says Robinson, best known for his incredibly elaborate work on such showpiece instruments as the Millionth Martin. Still, the majority of his work is adding smaller inlays that cost customers less than $300. "Many people don't realize that I will do stuff on their instrument, because they see some of my bigger jobs for famous companies, but I do. I've survived for 40 years because I do one-of-a-kind items."

For those seeking to add a new design to an existing instrument, personalized inlays are a surprisingly affordable way to memorialize a lost loved one, replace the standard fingerboard dots with something special, or just add a little bling. Robinson says, "Like jewelry, it's something you can personalize your guitar with."



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Larry Robinson



COURTESY OF LARRY ROBINSON

For other inlay artists, the work can take on a more conceptual approach, using the acoustic guitar as a canvas to tell a story with an expanding palette of materials that goes beyond the traditional materials of shell or wood. Kathy Wingert, who is based in Rancho Palos Verdes, California, says that she and Jimmi—who does inlays both for her mother's guitars and for other makers—"hardly ever do what we call 'a thing on a thing,' where it's just a picture or a flag dropped into a headstock. Jimmi generally uses the headstock as a window into a much larger design."

For Grit Laskin, the innovative Canadian guitar maker who designed the built-in armrest and co-created the side soundport seen on many custom guitars, the inlays that excite him have a visual narrative and tell a story. "It's an art form, and for me, it's not decoration," he says. Getting to the stage where he can sketch out a storyline in materials often involves many long conversations and email exchanges with each client in an effort to understand what is meaningful to the person commissioning the artwork—and in the case of Laskin and Kathy Wingert, who only inlay into guitars they themselves are building, the people who are also having those artists build the custom guitar. "My phone bill is astronomical because I like to talk to my clients," says Laskin.

For Laskin, these conversations lead to pages of notes that he uses to create a narrative that flows like a novel or film and has a beginning and an end. "People give me disparate aspects of the things that have meaning in their lives," he says. "I stare at all of the notes and think about how to link them and make them work. It has to flow—I insist on that—and I won't budge until I figure out a way. For me it is turning my own creative crank."

'If you spend $25,000 on an awesome guitar, you might spend a little more for a nice inlay to go with it.'
–LARRY ROBINSON

Some clients have very specific ideas about what they want and what materials should be used, while others might offer a vague idea or one-word prompt, like peace, before letting the artist follow their muse on a theme. Creating an elaborate artwork for a custom-made guitar requires a high level of trust between client and maker. "I start with a drawing at the beginning and about 40 percent of the time, they don't even want to see a sketch," Laskin says. "Sometimes they tell me they want to be surprised. I only do it on my guitars, so they're already spending a chunk of change to get a handmade guitar that is probably customized in 50 other ways. It's great that they give me so much trust—never mind that I'm getting paid to have fun."

When developing an inlay, Wingert often acts as an intermediary between the client and Jimmi, guiding the process on what is possible and what isn't. "Sometimes I get stuck in the middle, which can slow me down when I'm trying to work on a guitar," she says. "And sometimes I've had to work with both sides to find solutions that are doable for me or Jimmi within the confines of the materials available." Occasionally, a person will have an idea for a material that just doesn't exist, like using a shell in a color not available in nature, and a compromise has to be made to the material or the idea.

For all of the collaboration that may go into the commission of a personalized inlay, there comes a point when the discussion has to end and the artist has to put their jeweler's saw to the abalone. "It's collaborative up to a point," says Robinson, of the lines that must be drawn

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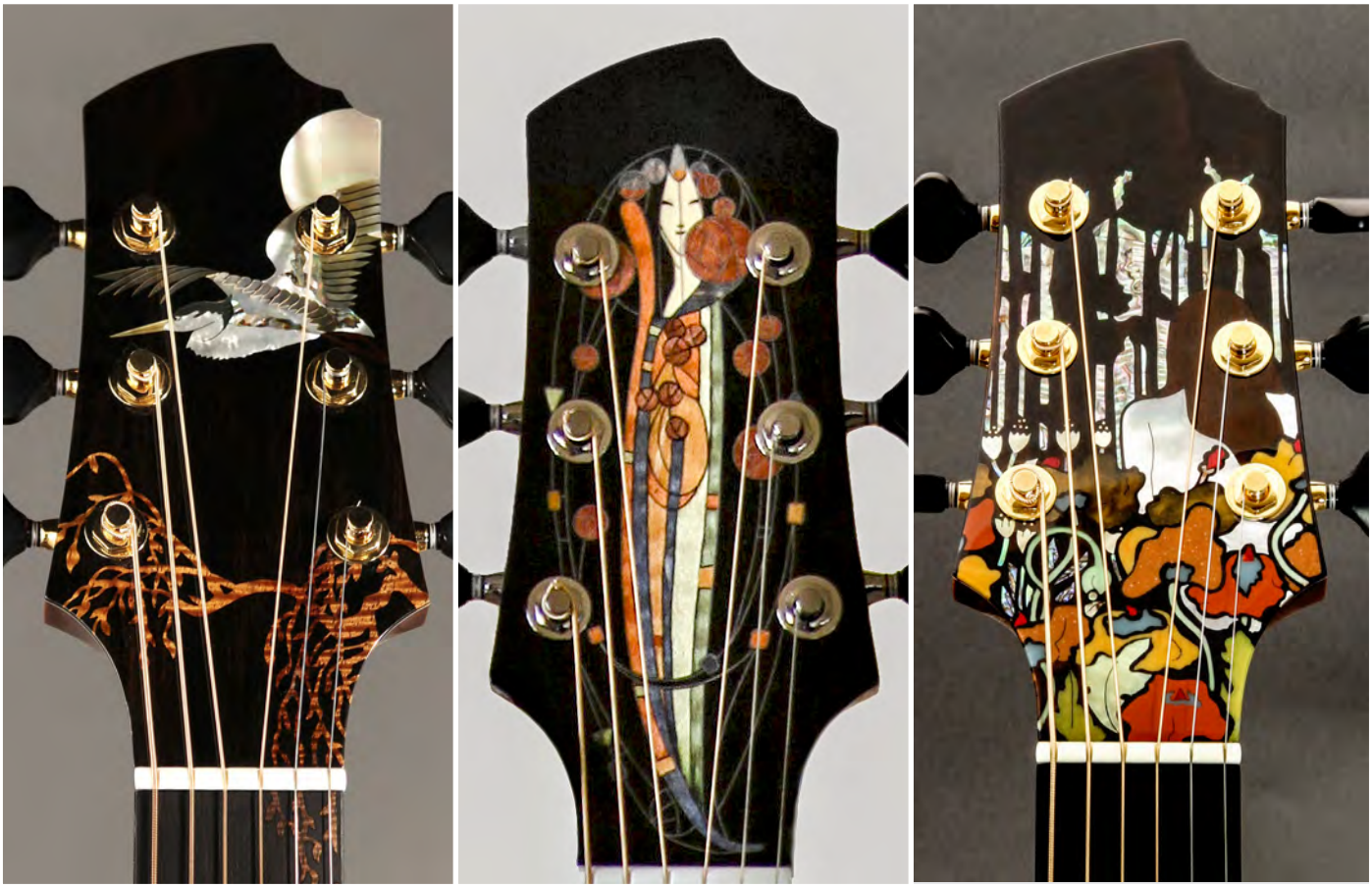
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Kathy Wingert



COURTESY OF KATHY WINGERT

to stay on schedule and budget. "If they have a specific design in mind, I will make it inlay-ready for their particular needs. For instance, a vine has to work within the parameters of a particular scale length, because people want them to have identifiable markers in specific places—they don't want them to be random. As far as the materials go, most of the time they leave me to my devices, but once they tell me to go ahead, they have to back off and leave me to my palette of materials."

Within the last two decades, several fabricated materials, including dye-stabilized wood, acrylics, and engineered stone have dramatically added to the traditional materials of shell, wood, and bone. Each of the artists became excited to talk about the new colors and textures. "I still use all of the traditional materials. I use nine or ten species of traditional shells, legal ivories, metals, and many of the traditional materials," says Laskin. "But now there are something like 105 flavors of reconstituted stone and it's incredible—it's like my palette has quadrupled with all of these colors and grain patterns." Even traditional materials like abalone are now available in sheets that allow artists to work in sizes never before possible. Still, Robinson is quick to point out that there are limits. "It's launched some more creativity, to a degree, but it's not as varied as what a painter can do by making finer shades and blending different areas."

So, what makes for a satisfying collaboration on a personalized inlay? For Wingert, it's the process of discovering what the client wants and working with both sides of the relationship to create the final work. "I love getting that satisfying email or phone call when someone gets a guitar, I love working with Jimmi, and I love it when people get what they want," she says.

And, what many of the people who turn to inlays want is not just something tailored to them: "It's personal to them in a way that produces something that is profoundly antithetical to our modern, digital world," according to Laskin.

Does it add anything beyond a personal touch? "Oh yeah, it's a talent booster," cracks Robinson before turning back to the point of a personalized inlay—the human factor and the uniqueness of each project. "When people buy things from me, they know that they are going to get the only one there is, and that means something to them. I've had people tell me, 'I enjoy that CNC stuff and it's nice to see more inlay on things, but your stuff has character.'" AG

SHELLS ON THE SHELF

Looking for inspiration for a custom inlay job? Check out these sumptuously illustrated books, which showcase a stunning range of possibilities within the medium, while providing insights into the minds of the artists.

The Art of the Inlay
by Larry Robinson

Grand Complications: 50 Guitars and 50 Stories
by William "Grit" Laskin

A Guitarmaker's Canvas: The Inlay Art of Grit Laskin *by Grit Laskin*

The Invisible Line: When Craft Becomes Art *by Larry Robinson*

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Mississippi Fred McDowell



Happy Traum (L) with the New World Singers





Mississippi John Hurt



Rory Block



Out of the Blues

Happy Traum, Stefan Grossman, Rory Block, and Steve James reflect on the 1960s blues revival

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER



Rev. Gary Davis with Stefan Grossman



Steve James



Son House



Rev. Gary Davis performs



Stefan Grossman



Lightnin' Hopkins

In the late 1950s and early '60s, prewar acoustic blues guitarists such as Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James, and Reverend Gary Davis earned late-in-life fame as new audiences eagerly devoured their music through performances at events like the Newport Folk Festival and LP reissues and compilations on labels like Folkways and Yazoo Records. Acoustic guitarists, many of them young and white, became enthralled by this earthy music, recorded in the 1920s and '30s and previously accessible mainly through old and rare 78 rpm discs. In an era before excellent roots and blues instruction was just a click away, and before the language was common knowledge among guitarists, the music was often inscrutable—the use of, say, a bottleneck slide or open tuning not always apparent to even the most attentive listener.

Among the young musicians who fell under the spell of the blues in the 1960s were Happy Traum, Stefan Grossman, Rory Block, and Steve James, names no doubt familiar to readers of this magazine. All four spent their formative years in New York during the folk and blues revival, which saw a lot of action in the clubs of Manhattan's Greenwich Village, and in that neighborhood's Washington Square Park. As such, these guitarists were able to seek out the old masters, befriending them and learning their secrets firsthand.

The prewar blues legends are long gone, but their former apprentices have spent decades passing on what they learned while promoting American roots guitar in general—in addition to their own performing and recording, Traum, through his Homespun Music Instruction; Grossman with his Guitar Workshop videos, audio recordings, and books; and Block and James through their various videos and books. Here they offer their reflections on the 1960s blues revival and how it shaped their lives in music.

HAPPY TRAUM

Finding Brownie McGhee

What was your path to the blues?

I started out being very influenced by Pete Seeger. He was my big hero when I first started to play, and so I often found myself in Washington Square Park, where I met all kinds of people who played with varying degrees of competency. I got to see people like Reverend Gary Davis, both in concert and on the street. He was literally a street singer for many years. And then in the late '50s, I was in college and spent quite a lot of time with Brownie McGhee, who was really my main guitar teacher. Any blues stuff that I do nowadays could be attributed to him.

How did you find Brownie McGhee?

Basically I met him because I had been listening to this record that he made—it was a ten-inch called *Brownie McGhee Blues*—and I was just completely smitten. I knew that he lived in New York somewhere, so I got the idea to just call him up and see if he'd give me lessons. He asked me to come show him what I could do, as kind of an audition, and I became one of the few people at that point who were studying with him.

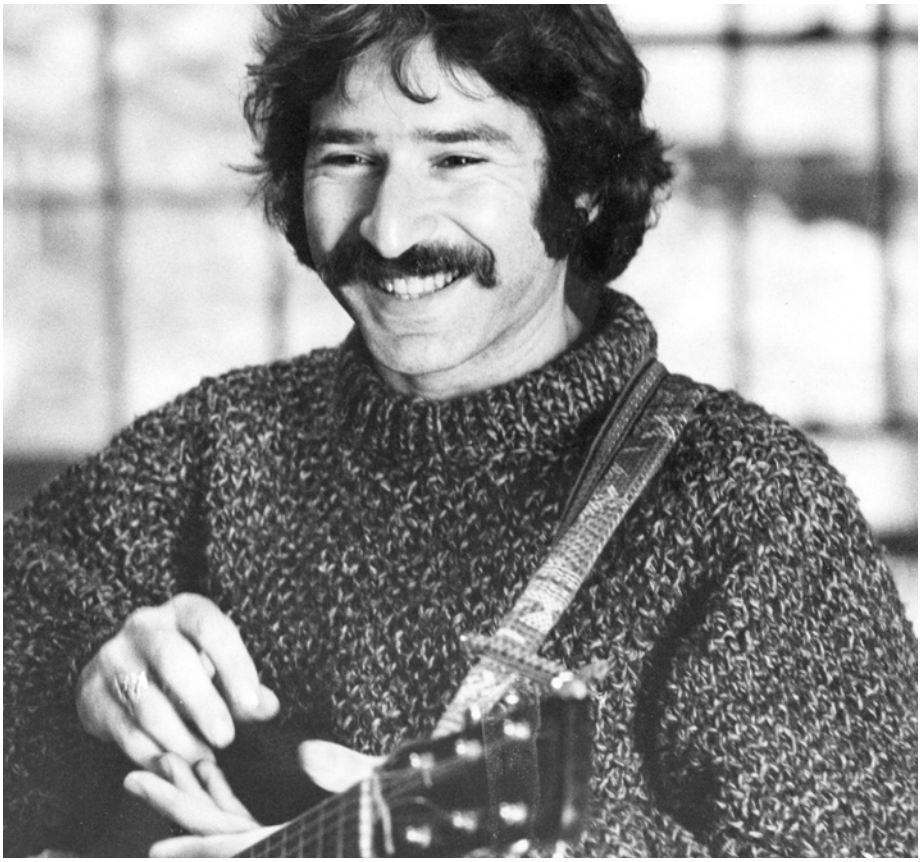
What were the lessons like?

I would go to his apartment, which was in East Harlem, on 125th Street—just a little walk-up. Sometimes I would have dinner with his wife and kids, waiting for him to show up. The lessons were five dollars each and could last anywhere from one to three hours. We would just start playing a song together and then I'd stop him to ask what he'd just done. He'd show me, and I would incorporate that lick into my playing. And he was a real stickler for a rhythm. Whatever sense of time I may have, I got from Brownie and any sense of time I don't have, he's not responsible for [*laughs*]. But the main thing that I learned from Brownie was moving my thumb in a really steady rhythm on the bass strings and picking licks on the treble strings. That's been my main style ever since.

Who are some of the other legends you encountered during the blues revival?

As the '60s progressed, people were bringing in some of the blues guys that we had only heard on records. Mississippi John Hurt, Fred McDowell, Mance Lipscomb, Son House, Lightnin' Hopkins—they all came to the Village and played in Gerde's Folk City or the Gaslight Cafe or the Bitter End. So we got to hear these amazing guys while they were still alive and could still play.

Happy Traum in the late 1960s



WIKIPEDIA

'We got to hear these amazing guys while they were still alive and could still play.'
–HAPPY TRAUM

What was it like to meet them in person, presumably after you had worn out their albums at home?

It was completely eye-opening. You might have only heard somebody on a record that was made in the late '20s, like Mississippi John Hurt, and you didn't even know what he looked like or if he was still alive. And then suddenly there he was in this little club, and you're sitting three feet away and watching him play. It was quite a revelation to many of us.

STEFAN GROSSMAN

Bridging the Big Gap

You, like Ernie Hawkins and others, spent your formative years taking lessons from the Reverend Gary Davis. How did you connect with Davis in the first place, and what was it like to have him as a teacher?

I had a friend, Bob Fox, who had been going up to see Reverend Davis up in the Bronx. He said, "Well, here's his phone number—give him a call." And so I rang and Reverend Davis said, "Come on up . . . bring your money, honey." That meant five dollars a lesson. My parents drove me there the first time, ostensibly because my father needed to buy a pair of shoes in the Bronx. But it was all a fabrication, because where Reverend Davis lived was considered one of the most dangerous blocks in America. He had a little shack behind these derelict apartment buildings that looked like Dresden, Germany, after the firebombing [in World War II].

Reverend Davis opened the door without his sunglasses on—he had one bulbous eye and the other was all white—and just sucked me in. It was such a fantastic atmosphere, and he was just amazing. And that was the beginning of two or three years of solid lessons. Reverend Davis had just done a record for Prestige, *Harlem Street Singer*, and he taught me the album song by song. Each lesson was as long as you wanted it to be; I would stay up there for hours and hours. Eventually I realized the enormity of his repertoire and started bringing a tape machine to document what he was playing—not just so I could later hear all the tunes I wanted to learn, but to help Reverend Davis publish and copyright his works.



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Stefan Grossman, 1985



JOSEPHINE AYERS

It must have been an amazing time to discover blues and blues musicians, especially in person.

Yes—you had all these incredible musicians, some of whom played as well, if not better, than they did in the ’20s and ’30s. On a good night down in the Village, you could hear Reverend Davis at Gerde’s Folk City; the Gaslight might have Mississippi John Hurt, and the next week Skip James.

How would you describe your dynamic with the blues musicians?

All the musicians were very open and helpful in showing us how they played guitar, telling stories, and answering the many questions that we had about the blues scene in the ’20s and before. I started to transcribe from the old records, and when I would meet someone like John Hurt, I would say, “Hey John, is this the way you played it?” He was just so chuffed to see this kid who could play exactly how he used to. It bridged the big gap between an elderly black man from the South and a Jewish teenager from Brooklyn.

The one thing that no one bothered to ask the musicians—these guys from Jim Crow Mississippi, and all the crap that came with it—was how they felt. Can you imagine how weird it must have been to all of a sudden be playing at the Newport Folk Festival to thousands of very young and appreciative white faces? But the musicians were completely supportive. And more than supportive, they just felt good about it, and we did, too. It was a real exchange of information.

RORY BLOCK

Feeling a Spiritual Presence

Before you got into the blues, you were immersed in a world of music.

My dad was a country fiddle player as well as a sandal maker. And at a given point in the day, he would be standing there fiddling in his store, Allan Block Sandal Shop. Over time, the word got out that there was this amazing music in the shop, and people brought their instruments. After a while, that meant some of the greatest musicians anywhere.

Who were some of the musicians that you remember the most, blues or otherwise?

Well, Bob Dylan lived two doors away from the shop, which was at 171 West Fourth Street. He would come in when he was starting out as a young man, just to chat with my dad. At one point, my dad rented a room in Pete Seeger’s wife’s parents’ brownstone. On weekends there were these amazing jam



DENNIS CAUDILL

Rory Block, 1982

sessions in the basement. And then that's where you would find people like Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly and Josh White, of course Pete Seeger, and many other luminaries. I would hear my parents talking about singing with Theodore Bikel the night before, and I assumed that everyone was hanging with him on the weekend [*laughs*].

Talk about meeting Stefan Grossman, who would introduce you to the blues.

Growing up, on Sunday afternoons I would go to Washington Square Park and there would be crowds surrounding the bluegrass and jazzy-sounding circles. And then there were random people just roaming around, playing all kinds of great stuff on banjo, fiddle, and guitar. One Sunday I heard this wonderful-sounding, bouncy music. I made my way through the crowd, and there was Stefan Grossman, who was probably 17 or 18 years old at the time, playing ragtime guitar. And I was like, "What is *that*?"

'Can you imagine how weird it must have been to all of a sudden be playing at Newport Folk Festival to thousands of very young and appreciative white faces?'
–STEFAN GROSSMAN

Stefan was in the middle of a small group of blues connoisseurs. Some were record collectors and were looking for the early blues players, like Dick Waterman, who ultimately found Son House; others were great guitarists, like John Fahey. And that's when I started playing music. Stefan caught me up on all the stuff that was going on with the reissued early country blues. I would listen to hours of this amazing music on a reel-to-reel tape recorder that Stefan was lending me, falling asleep with headphones on.

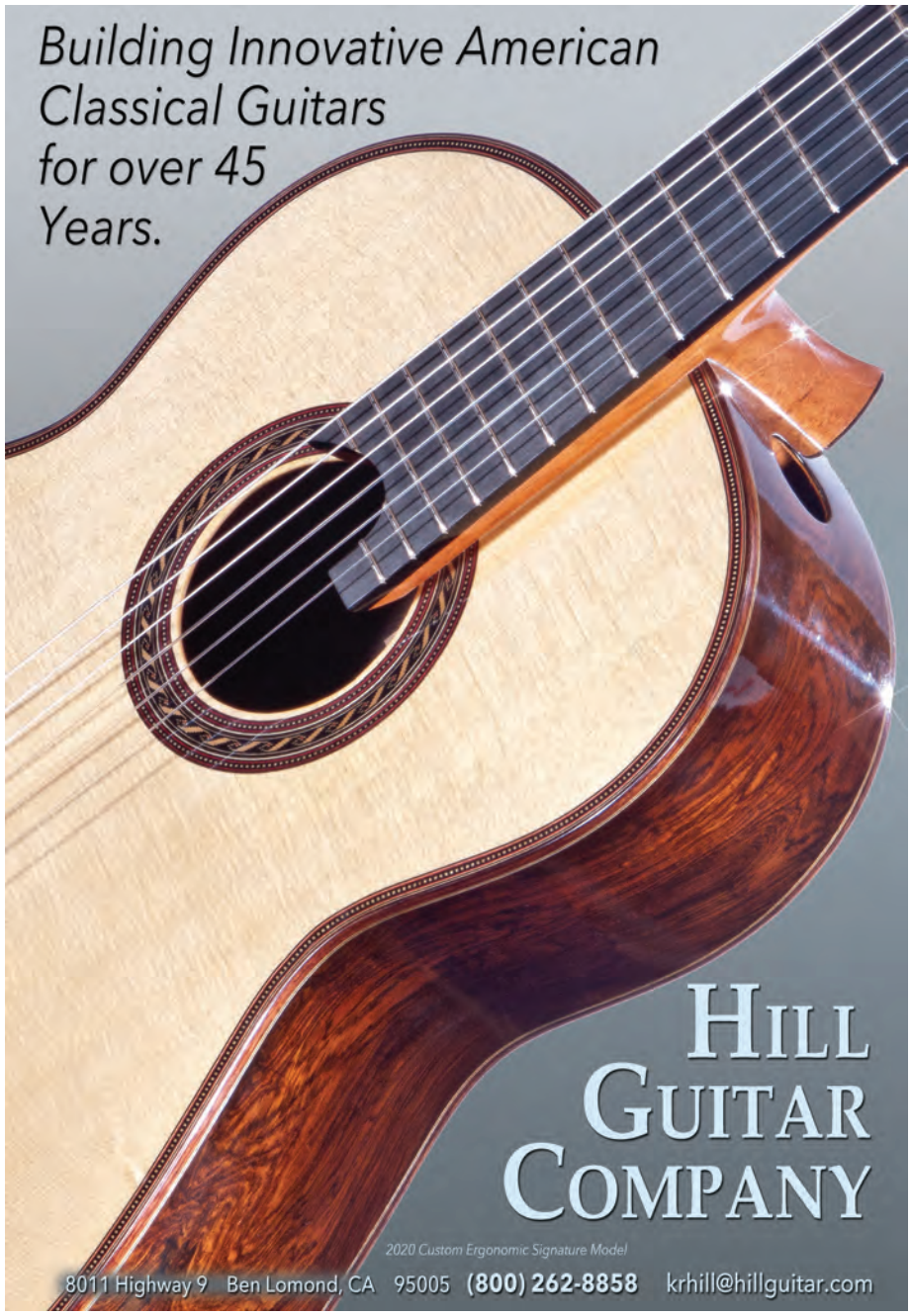
When you were 15, you and Grossman hitchhiked across the country on a deep musical journey.

Yes, it was all about the music. Stefan would find old Martin guitars in pawnshops that you could buy for $50 and sometimes less. People thought of them as old instruments that nobody cared about. On the trip, Stefan got a collection of pearl-inlaid Martins that just needed neck resets and a little bit of polish. We finally got to Berkeley, California, and stayed at the little home of Ed Denson, who had founded Takoma Records.

One day there was a knock at the door and it was Fred McDowell, which was surprising and vivid. He gets a chapter in my book *When a Woman Gets the Blues*. We performed together at the Jabberwock and that's when somebody jumped up while I was playing and said , "She plays like a man!" And I thought, "What are they talking about? Why should I play a certain way just because I'm a girl? I just play."

What was it like to meet other blues legends, like Son House and Mississippi John Hurt?

He was really beautiful, Son House, and just had this glow. I felt like I was touching a piece of the past just sitting in his presence, as if Robert Johnson's spirit was around him. Son House was unbelievably inspiring to me the way that he played, the way he snapped the strings, the way he threw his head back. The passion of it affected me deeply, and I knew that's the way the music should be played—it wasn't going to be polite or laid back. And that's the way I've played the blues



ever since, really laying into the strings, and what I pass on to my students.

As for Mississippi John Hurt, one day Stefan and I got on the train, went to Long Island, and walked right into the back room of this beautiful old theater. There was Mississippi John Hurt, another blues god. I had already been working on "Frankie," which was my favorite Mississippi John Hurt song, but I never thought I'd get to see him play it up close and in person. That type of inspiration really can't be put in words. I just felt a spiritual presence, as I did with all of the early players that I was fortunate enough to meet.

STEVE JAMES

Expressing Yourself

What was your gateway to the blues?

Lead Belly and boogie-woogie piano and stuff like that are crib memories for me. I grew up in a house with 78 rpm records. When I was still quite young, my family moved from the Bronx to Yonkers, and that's where I took up the guitar. In 1962 my dad gave me his 1948 Harmony Patrician, one of their higher-end archtops, which I wish I still had. Not long after that I started taking lessons from a gospel guitarist from White Plains, New York, who would go from house to house in surrounding communities. He taught me how to fingerpick. He was a real big guy with a real high voice, and he said, "Lose the pick, you're just wasting the guitar." I was in a band playing electric bass when the Beatles broke around the same time, and though I liked the Beatles, I was much more interested in Mississippi John Hurt.

What was it like to hear these semi-obscure records from the 1920s, without the greatest sonic fidelity, and then hear and meet the bluesmen in person?

Even as a teenager, I remember it as almost like a miracle. I was at the Newport Folk Festival in 1966. I had just turned 16 and I had a Gibson J-50. I hitchhiked up there with my childhood friend and fellow traveler in music David Lusterman [the founder of Stringletter and *AG*'s publisher and editorial director]. We were there for two days and heard live performances not just of Son House, Skip James, Bukka White, Howlin' Wolf, and Lightnin' Hopkins but also Doc Watson, Kilby Snow, and the Jim Kweskin Jug Band. I was almost in a state of shock the whole time. When Skip James raised his head, looked out at the audience and then started to play "Hospital Blues" ["*Washington D.C. Hospital Center Blues"],* it was a phenomenal experience.

And this was at a time when tablature and method books were not as readily available as they are now. When I first heard Bukka White live, at the Little Carnegie Hall of all places, I said, "What is he doing?" What he was doing was playing bottleneck slide guitar. And I had to play it myself right away.

Steve James, 1988



REAGAN BRADSHAW

How did you learn?

I was kind of on my own. But fortunately it was easy to get on the bus or the subway and go to concerts. I began to gather little bits of crucial information—like, to make your guitar sound like Bukka White you've got to use this open tuning.

Did you, like Happy Traum, Rory Block, Stefan Grossman, and others make frequent treks to Washington Square Park?

That was a little pilgrimage I would make quite frequently. There was plenty of phenomenal stuff going on in a lot of different places, but I would often wind up in the Village and go hear whoever was there, like the Reverend Gary Davis at the Gaslight on one memorable occasion. More than once I stood in the doorway of Allan Block's sandal shop and listened to whoever happened to be playing, even if I didn't know who they were. Turns out that the young girl who was playing so doggone well one day was Rory Block [*laughs*]!

You spent much of your adult life in Tennessee and Texas, and in the 1970s sought out old rural blues musicians.

At a certain point, I made the calculation that many of the musicians wouldn't be around much longer. So when I was down in Tennessee, I met some people who knew some people and the next thing you know, there I was, sitting in Sam McGee's living room. We spent hours together telling stories, and he taught me everything he could. It was late when I left, and I said, "Well, I'll see you again—I can't wait to come back." A couple of months later he was dead.

Subsequently I moved down to Memphis, and I was playing with Furry Lewis, as sort of his attaché guitarist. It wasn't like he was at death's door, but I was looking at him and going, "God, this guy is 80 years old." More and more, I was getting the idea that things were finite.

What did you take away from these blues legends?

The main advice that I got from Furry and others wasn't so much how to form chords—although they were good for that—but basically this: "What you're doing here is expressing yourself. So don't copy me. Express yourself. That's what your guitar is for." AG

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Tone Control

The techniques you need to make your guitar sound gorgeous

BY MICHAEL CHAPDELAINE

THE PROBLEM

Your tone isn't amazingly beautiful, like Andrés Segovia's. And you want it to be.

THE SOLUTION

Relearn your picking-hand approach by breaking it down into discrete steps.

There are good and bad characteristics inherent to every instrument. The acoustic guitar has several drawbacks: It's too quiet, doesn't have much sustain, and arguably lacks any significant repertoire from most periods before 1920, other than some lute, simple keyboard, and J.S. Bach violin and cello suite transcriptions. And it is extremely difficult to play polyphonic music on the guitar, even though it is often used as a solo instrument.

The good thing about the guitar—and it is so good that it makes us want to toil endless hours with our aching fingers and strain our ears and stretch our musical boundaries trying to overcome the aforementioned problems—is that gorgeous sound. That beautiful, sweet tone, which can soothe the ear and bathe the mind in a euphoria that is as close to bliss as sound can bring us. Strong statement? Not if you play guitar.

I think that possessing beautiful tone is most of what it takes to play great. If you have lovely tone and have done the work that is required to achieve it, then it's more likely that people will be moved by your playing and will want to hear more of it. Hearing a lovely sound is much of what is appealing about music. If you play a simple melody with beautiful tone, you will touch the souls of more people than if you tear through Niccolò Paganini's "Caprice No. 24" with bad tone.

The process of acquiring fine tone will define to you all the things that are possible when the union of your hands, ears, mind, and soul with the guitar occurs. You don't play a typewriter or a blender. The guitar is a magical thing with which we can access a very profound level of consciousness and communication not easily available in our normal existence. I am certain that when we understand how each note on the guitar sounds, from its birth until the time when our ears can no longer hear it, and how that sound makes us feel, then we will have some idea of what to do with the notes. The great Zen teachers say that when one can find joy in silence and find interest simply in the feeling of the breath entering and exiting the body, then everything else will be powerfully stimulating.

1 GET THE RIGHT RATIO OF NAIL AND FLESH

So how do you get this great tone? OK, here it is. And make no mistake, this is for all guitarists and not just for those eccentric classical players. First you will need to shape your nails in a way that takes advantage of the softness of the flesh and precision and hardness of the nail. The nail should protrude about 1/16th–1/8th of an inch beyond the fingertip, as viewed from the palm side of the hand, shorter on the thumb side of each finger and slanting to longer on the pinky side.

You must first contact the string with the flesh, very close to but not quite touching the nail. Then you pull the finger through the string so that the string gradually ramps onto the nail, which transfers the energy of your motion to the string, causing it to vibrate. The muscles used for this are only those that pull the finger straight back toward the wrist (flexors). Don't use any muscles that make your finger twist or move toward another finger. It should feel neutral.

2 AVOID THE DREADED BZZZ AND CLICK

The nail gives the clarity and power to the sound, and reduces the friction created when a finger moves across a string. While a fingertip without a nail certainly can pluck a string, plucking with a thin surface like a nail or a pick will give the attack of the note more definition and projection. It will also reduce drag, allowing you to play more efficiently and ultimately faster and with more control.

The problem, however, with nail or plectrum playing is that if a softer surface is not used to dampen the string before the nail or pick contacts it, the note will begin with a



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL CHAPDELAINE

The nail should protrude about 1/16th–1/8th of an inch beyond the fingertip, as viewed from the palm side of the hand, shorter on the thumb side of each finger and slanting to longer on the pinky side.

click. Not pleasant! Then, there is the *bzzz* factor, that nasty sound that a vibrating string makes when it is touched by a hard surface like a nail, pick, or calloused fingertip. This is difficult to avoid with a pick, but a fingerstyle player can solve the *bzzz* by using the fingertip's flesh to reduce the degree of insult occurring when nail meets string.

The flesh, the skin just in front of the nail, must be used to dampen the movement of the string if it's vibrating from a recent pluck. The softer the flesh is, the better it will accomplish this mission and the less *bzzz* your tone will have. If your flesh is calloused or dry and rough, you must use some kind of moistening cream to soften it while not playing.

Click! This is the sound that your nail will make if you begin the stroke from a point on the flesh which is any distance away from the nail. So, you must begin the stroke at the nail, but without the nail making initial contact with the string, as that would make a *bzzz*.

"But oh, maestro professor, how do I dampen the string with the flesh *and* start the stroke at the nail at the same time? It sounds impossible," you are screaming. That's right, it is impossible. So here's how it's really done: You must first land on the string with the flesh, so that the nail is a tiny fraction of a millimeter from the string—or way close but not quite touching it. To begin the pluck, you simply apply pressure to the string and your nail then contacts the string without a *bzzz* or a *click*. Then you pluck it. Eventually, this will all happen in one motion, and you will not think about it. Challenging? You bet it is. But if it were easy, everybody would be doing it.

The guitar is a magical thing with which we can access a very profound level of consciousness and communication not easily available in our normal existence.



You must first land on the string with the flesh, so that the nail is a tiny fraction of a millimeter from the string—or way close but not quite touching it.

3 DO THE WORK

Do the work in a very quiet place. Any sound other than your guitar will cover up the *bzzz* and *click* and make it impossible to evaluate your work. Do it for a week, twice per day, for a half hour each session. Don't play anything else; that will only reestablish your old habits and tone. Take the following steps; listen hard and get it right:

Position your right forearm such that it crosses the midpoint of your guitar's lower bout a few inches from elbow. Your wrist should be way relaxed and the hand hanging like it's asleep. Then, bring it to the strings with minimum motion and effort so that your thumbnail is parallel to the fifth string and resting on it between nail and flesh. That will result in about 0–5 percent of wrist arch and bend. Rotate your forearm so that your index palm knuckle is slightly closer to the top of the guitar than your pinky knuckle. Play over the soundhole.

- Relax all the muscles from neck to fingertip, while engaging your bicep to hold your hand gently in place.
- Place the flesh of the fingertip on the string, so that the nail is less than .000001mm from the string.
- Relax. Listen to the silence.
- In a quantum (all at once) motion, pull the nail through the string so that the fingertip comes to rest on the next string. (Classical guitarists call this "rest stroke," or *apoyando*).
- Relax again and listen to the string until its sound is gone.
- Bring the finger back to the string that you just plucked and repeat from step 1. Make sure you return to the string with the least travel possible. Don't make an arch or overshoot the string that you are playing. Repeat on all trebles. Do the same with your thumb on the basses.

That's it. If you do these steps slowly enough and with great care and dedication, you will reduce or eliminate the dreaded *bzzz* and *click*. When those are absent, what is left is the best sound your guitar can make—and an open gateway to the sound of your soul. This, I think you will agree, is a very beautiful thing.

Michael Chapdelaine is the only guitarist to have ever won first prize in both prestigious classical (GFA International Classical Guitar Competition) and fingerstyle (National Fingerstyle Championship) competitions. He was a professor of music at the University of New Mexico for 33 years and performs and teaches internationally. michaelchapdelaine.com

Blues Hands

Fretting and fingerpicking training in the key of C

BY PETE MADSEN

Getting a handle on the myriad styles of prewar blues artists such as Robert Johnson, Mississippi John Hurt, Big Bill Broonzy, and Blind Blake can be daunting, to say the least. Each player had a signature sound, created by idiosyncratic right- and left-hand techniques, requiring careful study to master. While these players all used their picking-hand thumbs to some degree to create chugging rhythms, some would occasionally drop the bass pattern to emphasize the melodic phrases. These breaks were opportunities to create single-note runs that would have been difficult while fretting chords.

In this lesson we will look at three ways to play a 12-bar blues in the key of C major, through the lens of the old blues masters, so that you can ultimately incorporate more nuances into your playing. Along the way you will work on alternating-bass patterns, hammer-ons and pull-offs, and explore when and where the steady bass pattern—a staple of early country-blues guitarists—can be interrupted and replaced with single-note runs.

The version of F shown in Example 1 may be different from what you are used to.



JOEY LUSTERMAN

WEEK ONE

In C, the 12-bar progression consists of three familiar chords: C (I), F (IV), and G7 (V). The version of F shown in **Example 1** may be different from what you are used to. You will need to wrap your fretting hand's thumb around the neck to fret the low F on string 6. This grip works better here than a standard six-string barre chord, as it frees up the fourth finger for chordal embellishments.

Example 2 gives you a two-bar fingerpicking pattern for a C chord, which you will use throughout the lesson. Note the characteristic syncopation—in the first measure, there's a melodic note on the "and" of beat 3, while in the second bar there are notes on the "ands" of both 2 and 3. Pick the bass notes on strings 5 and 4 with your thumb (*p*), and use any combination of your index (*i*), middle (*m*), and ring (*a*) fingers on strings 1–3. I tend to dedicate my index finger to string 3, middle to 2, and ring to 1. Many blues players, however, only used one or two fingers, plus the thumb, for fingerpicking.

Example 3 applies the same picking pattern to the F chord. If you have never used your thumb to fret string 6, this might prove a bit challenging. Pretend like you are gripping a shovel or rake; applying the proper amount of pressure to the strings is as much a matter of finding the grip that works for you as it is about developing strength. Both take time.

Example 4 applies the fingerpicking pattern to a G7 chord, while **Example 5** takes you through the last four measures of a typical 12-bar blues. In this version, the chords change every measure. You should be able to move between chords without losing the bass pattern or timing. If you find this difficult, go slow; set a metronome at around 60 bpm and make sure you can keep the bass going as you move from chord to chord.

WEEK TWO

It's one thing to get the alternating bass down, but it takes another level of gymnastics to maintain an active fretting hand as you fingerpick. The next hurdle is to add chord extensions, hammer-ons, and pull-offs, which were used extensively by players such as Robert Johnson and John Hurt. This week's examples will maintain the same rhythmic makeup as the previous patterns, but will add new notes to the chords.

Beginners' Tip #1

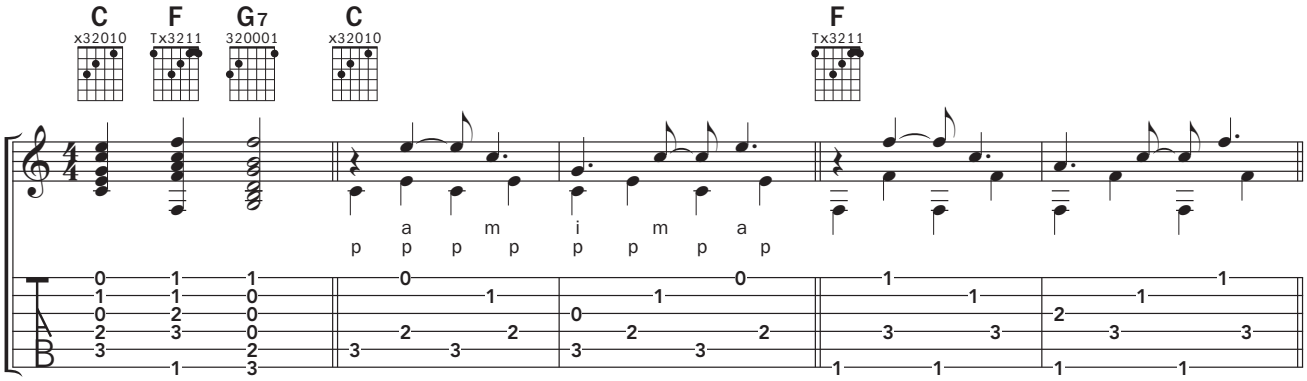
Try making the chord changes, but just play the bass pattern along with the metronome. This will give a you feel for the correct timing of the chords, without being overly concerned with getting all the picking down immediately.

Beginners' Tip #2

Practice hammer-ons and pull-offs independent of the song you are playing. For instance, take Example 7 and focus on the first two beats of measure 1. Keep repeating the two-beat segment until you can play it with confidence.

WEEK 1

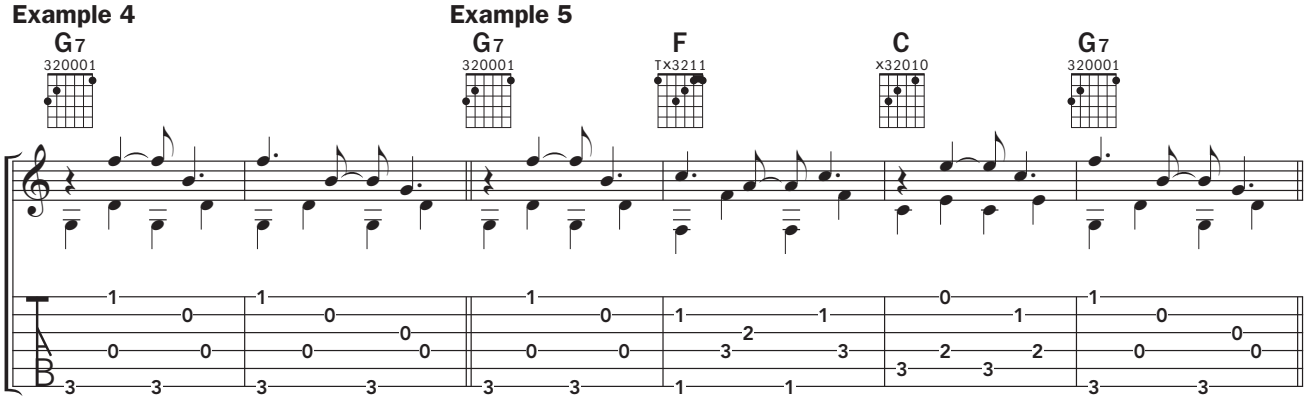
Example 1



Example 2

Example 3

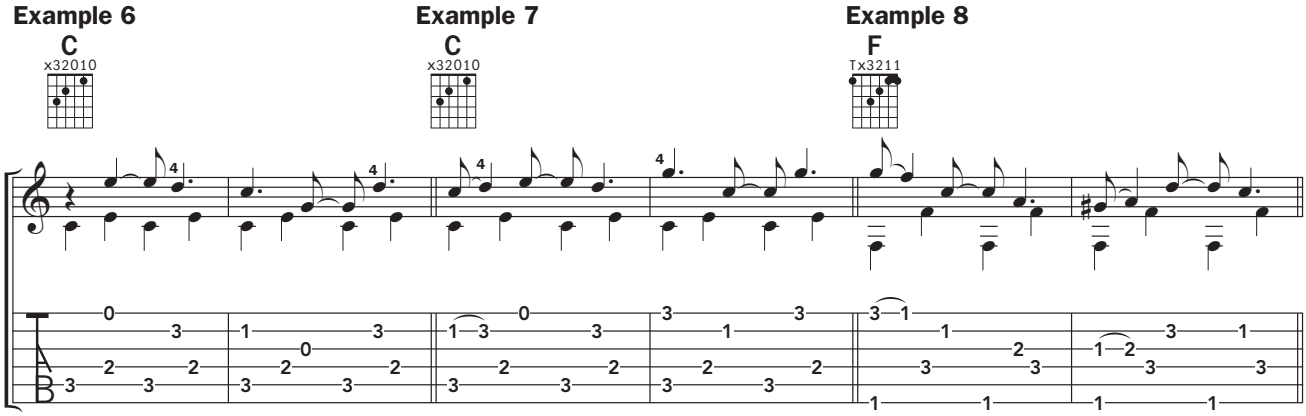
Example 4



Example 5

WEEK 2

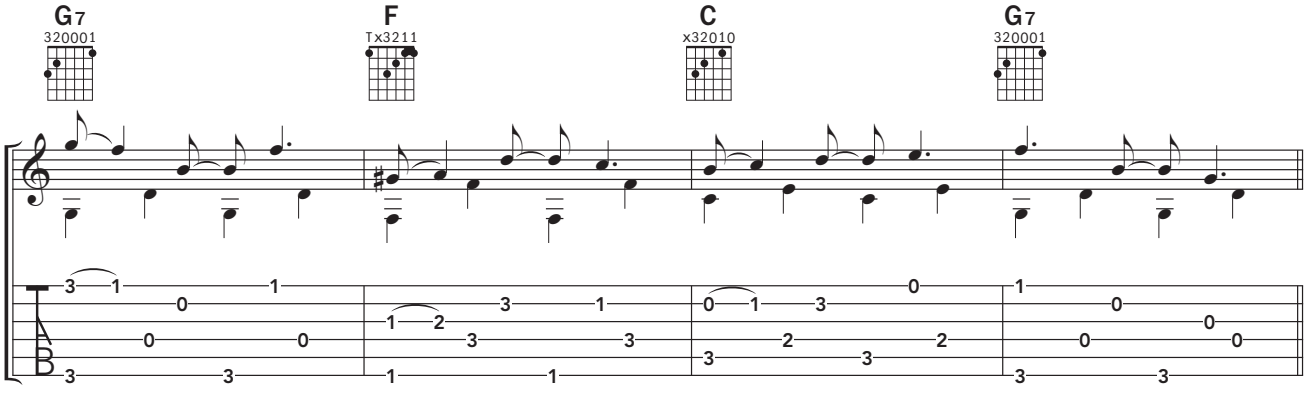
Example 6



Example 7

Example 8

Example 9



The C chord in **Example 6** has you using your fourth finger to grab the D note on string 2, fret 3. In the second measure of this example, notice that the fourth finger will come off the string and back on. **Example 7** uses a hammer-on for the second-string D. Since you will be performing this maneuver with your fourth finger—the weakest digit—you might need to practice it a bit before it sounds good. I would advise "flicking" your finger onto the string, but don't raise it too high, since the increased distance can lead to inaccuracy.

In **Example 8**, return to the F chord and use your fourth finger for a pull-off right off the bat. It helps to bear down on the strings you are playing and not worry as much about the other notes of the chord you are fretting. That being said, make sure that your first finger is barring the top three strings, so that you can perform the hammer-on in bar 2.

Example 9 once again takes you through the last four measures of a 12-bar sequence. You will need to move quickly between the chords as you play various hammer-ons and pull-offs. The pull-off on beat 1 requires a fairly challenging spread of the fingers. If it's too difficult, try simply fretting the sixth string with your thumb and using your third and first fingers for the pull-off. This might also ease the transition to the F chord, which should be played with the thumb fretting the sixth string.

WEEK THREE

Now that you have established a solid bass and created some interesting additions to the chords, it's time to look at ways of letting the bass drop out to create breaks in the music. In **Example 10**, use double-stops to navigate a chord. You can hear phrases similar to this in Robert Johnson's "From Four Until Late" and Big Bill Broonzy's "Shuffle Rag." Moves like this can be performed on any two strings between any two chord shapes, as shown in **Example 11**.

You can also use the chord shape as an outline for single-string runs. The lick in **Example 12**, for instance, implies an F7 chord. The third-fret D is bent a half step to E♭, which is the flatted seventh of the F chord. The hammer-on at the end of the first measure proceeds to spell out an F6 chord (F A C D). Similarly, the run in **Example 13** descends through a G7 chord. Blind Blake would use runs like this throughout his playing.

WEEK FOUR

Let's put it all together in a piece I call "Evolution Blues." Start out with the normal alternating bass over a C chord. Then, use your fourth finger to grab the second-string D. The second time you perform this maneuver, slide from the third to the fifth fret and play a descending run similar to Ex. 10, culminating in a C7 chord in measure 4. Break up the two bars of F into an alternating bass and single-string run, setting you up to do the same descending run over the C chord that you played in measure 3. Then, do some single-note runs over the G7 and F chords before playing a turnaround that toggles back and forth between C and G.

Since "Evolution Blues" ends on a G7 chord, you are invited to play subsequent verses until you are ready to resolve to a C chord. Try to invent some single-note runs based on chord shapes, as well as some ideas for navigating between two chord shapes using double-stops. Keep in mind, however, that you don't want to fly up and down the fretboard. It's better to stay in one place and find the shortest navigational route to the intended chord tones.

Pete Madsen is a San Francisco Bay Area–based guitarist, author, and educator who specializes in acoustic blues, ragtime, and slide guitar. learnbluesguitarnow.com, petemadsenguitar.com

Beginners' Tip #3

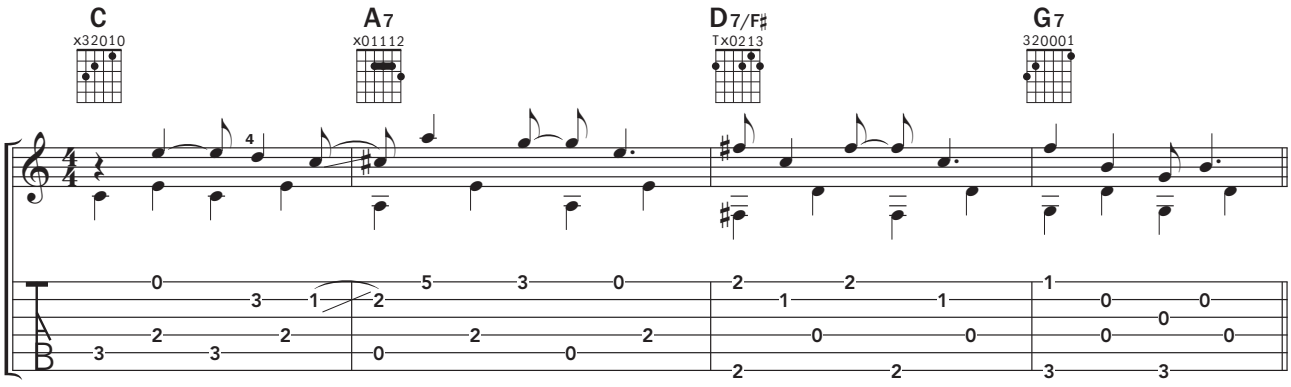
If you take common chord shapes and break them up into pairs of adjacent strings, you will discover some interesting navigational tools that you can move up or down the fretboard to find new chord shapes.

Beginners' Tip #4

Use chord shapes as templates for single-string runs. For example, think of the top three notes of an open C chord as starting points for a run, and then walk to and from the chord tones with chromatic or scalar runs.

TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Since you have been working with I–IV–V chord changes, a logical next step would be to incorporate other changes, like this example's ragtime blues progression: C–A7–D7–G. Start off with some basic alternating bass, add hammer-ons and pull-offs into the mix, and then try some single-note runs that allow you to maneuver from chord to chord.



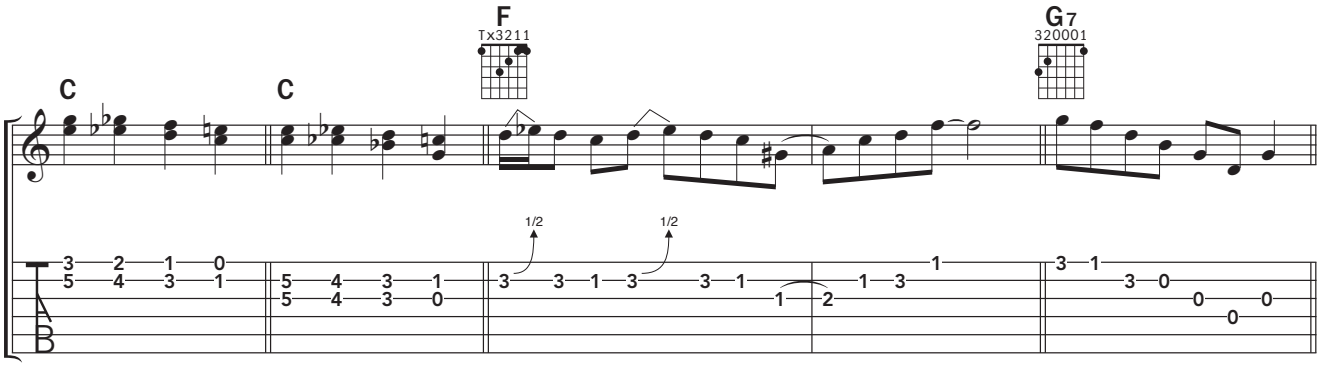
WEEK 3

Example 10

Example 11
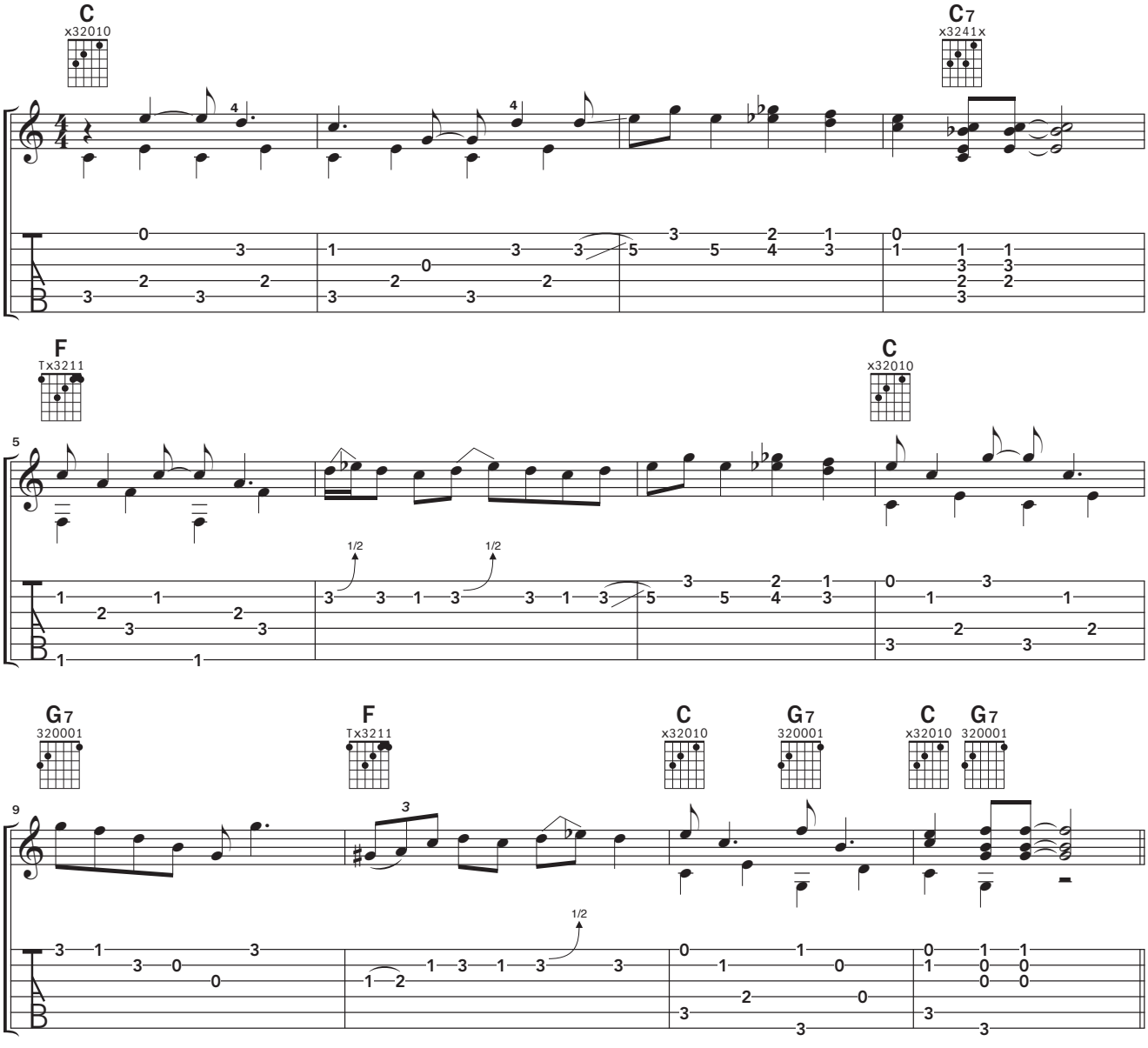
Example 12

Example 13



WEEK 4

"Evolution Blues"



Cocaine Blues

The Reverend Gary Davis' unique take on country picking

BY ERNIE HAWKINS

In the 1960s, fingerpicking blues players, folkies, and rockers alike—Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Bob Dylan, Dave Van Ronk, Townes Van Zandt, Keith Richards, and Jackson Browne, to name a few—fell under the spell of Reverend Gary Davis' "Cocaine Blues." Davis himself once told me he considered the tune to be an example of what he called "country picking." This early style of playing remains in the first position and uses a straightforward alternating bass throughout, making it an easy introduction to Davis' music.

Davis played "Cocaine Blues" throughout his career, sometimes with spoken lyrics. This transcription is based on an early version, an instrumental heard on his album *Pure Religion and Bad Company*, recorded in June 1957, in New York City. On the surface, "Cocaine Blues" might seem less sophisticated than Davis' typically complex style (see lesson feature on page 22). But, using a common progression in C major—involving the I (C/C7), IV (F), V (G), and III (E) chords—he turns the piece into something really special, teeming with interesting details. For instance, on the I chord, Davis never once uses a C note in the bass, opting instead for a low fifth (G), which provides more color and tension. And in spots like bar 8, he hints at a chord seldom heard in the blues, Fmaj7 (F A C E), courtesy of the open first string.

When approaching the C/G chord, Davis often hammers-on a fourth string bass note on the fourth beat of the preceding measure. This contributes to the song's contemplative and hypnotic effect, which is reinforced by the lines that snake around the upper strings to form a simple melody. Meanwhile, the simple alternating-bass structure acts as a platform that allows Davis to endlessly improvise.
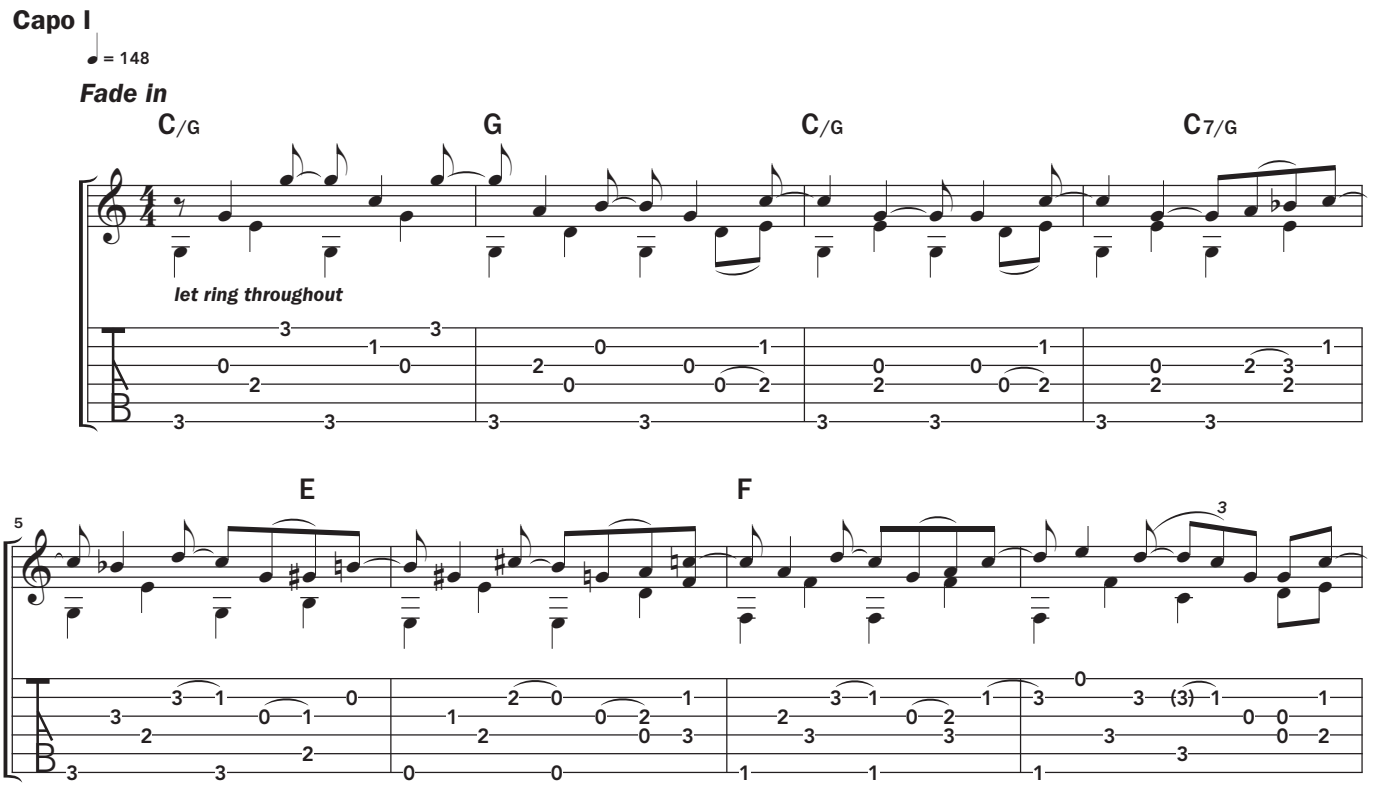


Beyond the technical aspects, there is a seriously bittersweet tone to Davis' guitar on "Cocaine Blues." It seems to come from a very deep place in his soul. And when Davis added his extemporaneous spoken words to the piece, they could be funny, witty, down-and-dirty, nasty, and even serious. Be sure to check out the guitarist's various recordings of the piece and try channeling his spirit when you play "Cocaine Blues." AG
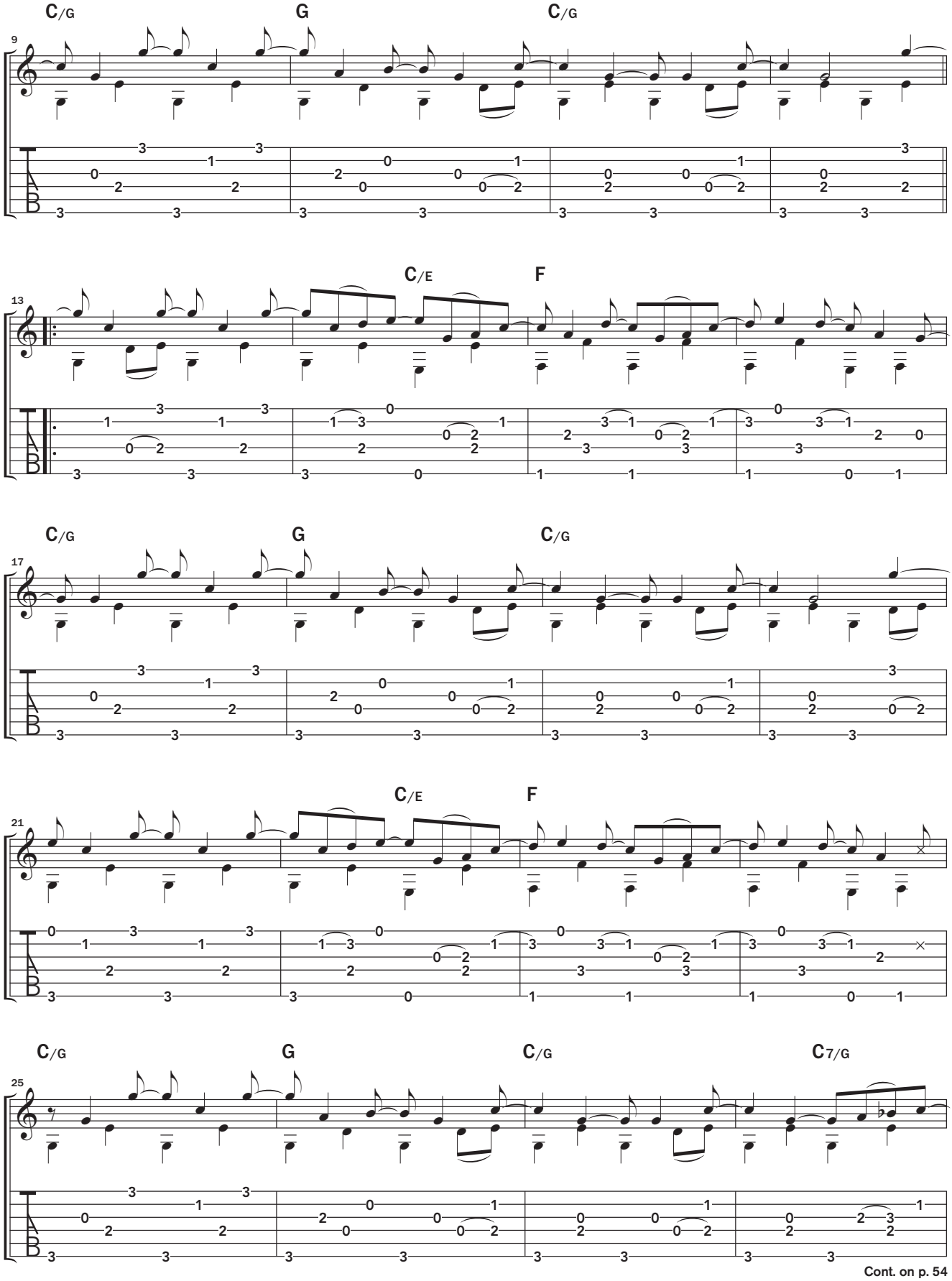
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COCAINE BLUES

BY GARY DAVIS
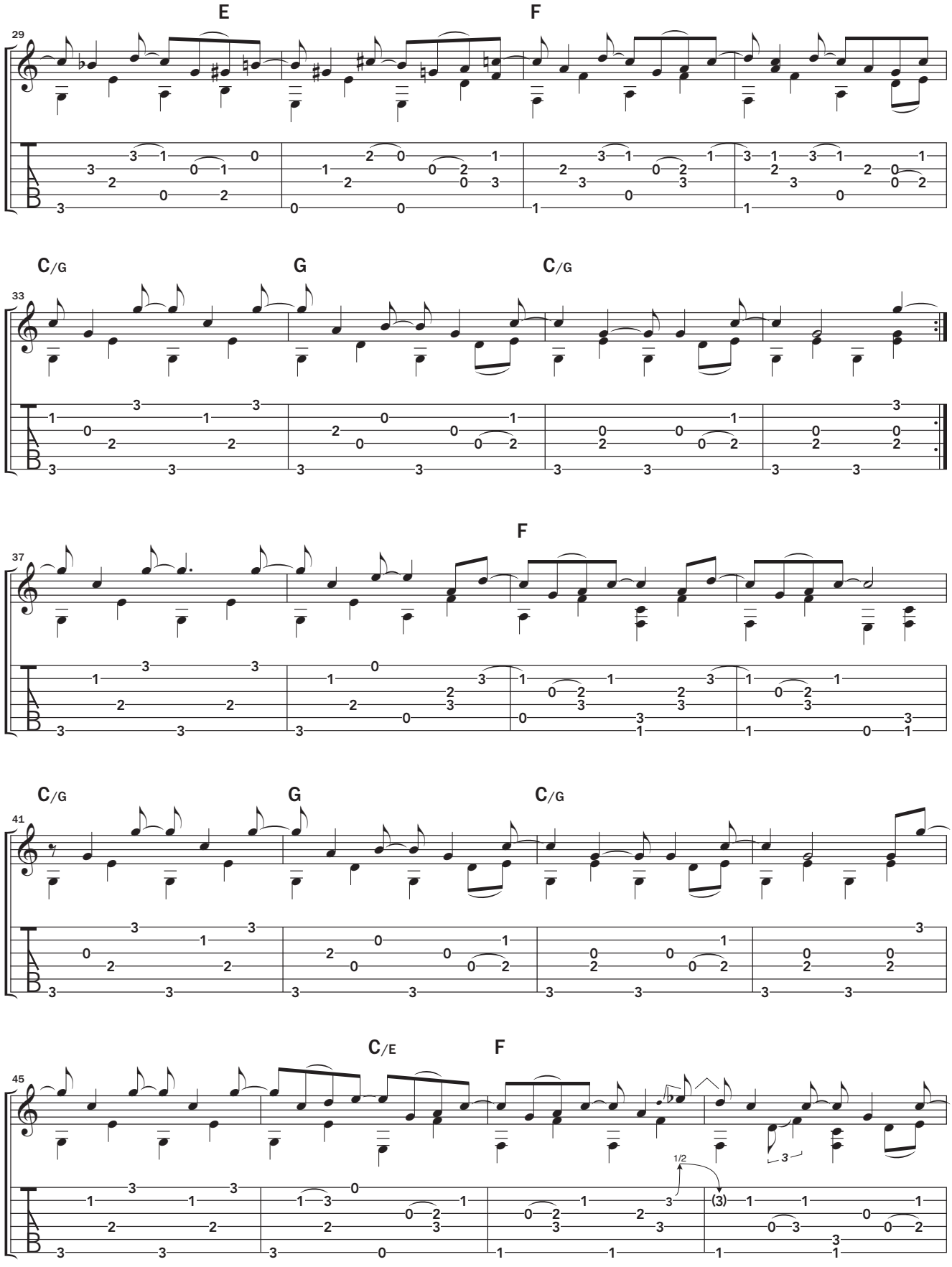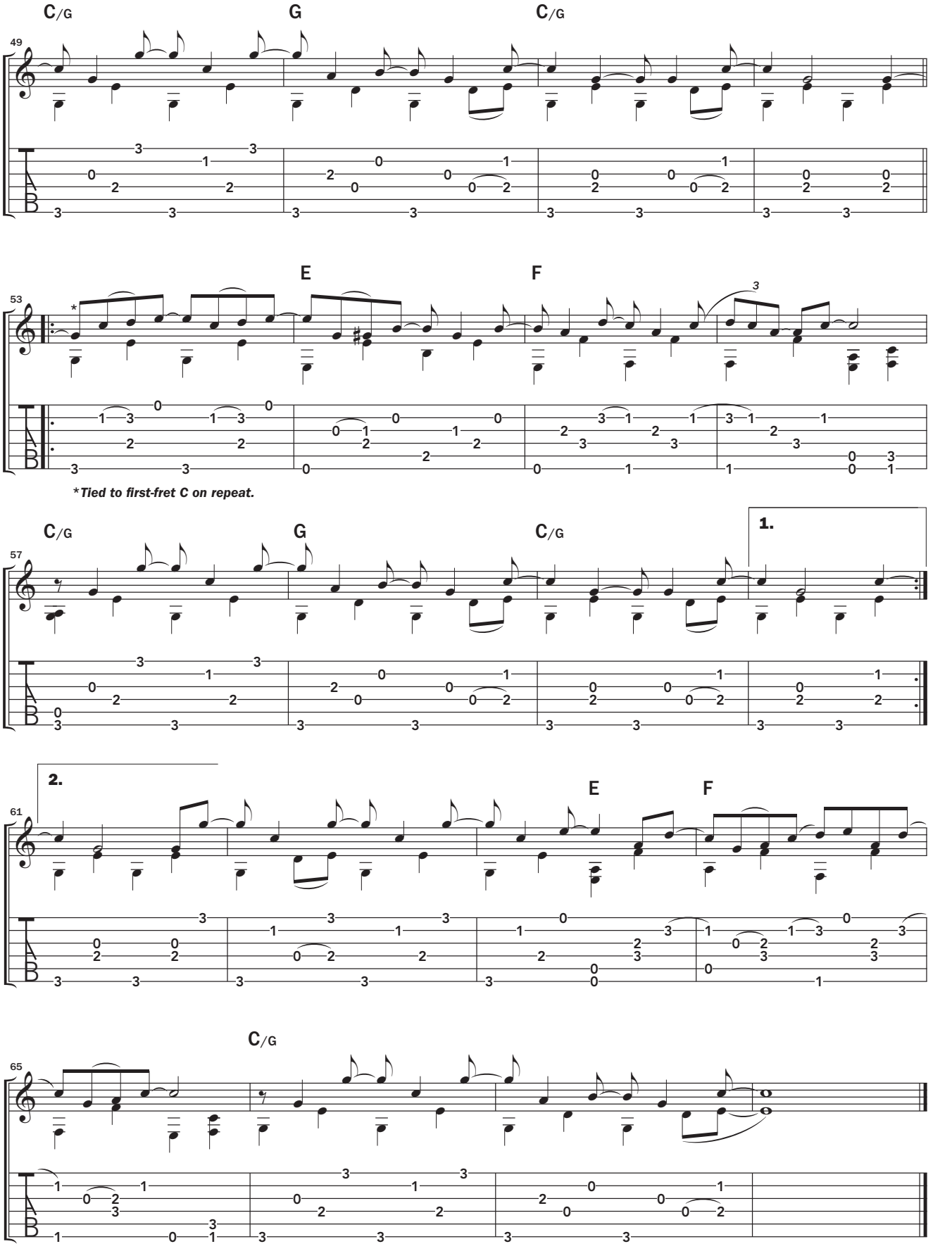


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Cont. on p. 54

Cont. from p. 53




C/G
G
C/G
49
E
F
53
*Tied to first-fret C on repeat.
C/G
G
C/G
1.
57
2.
E
F
61
C/G
65

READERS' PICK

Charlie Byrd, 1976



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The Girl from Ipanema

A bossa nova classic, as interpreted by Charlie Byrd

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

In 1962, Brazilian poet Vinicius de Morae and songwriter and composer Antônio Carlos Jobim, having had success in composing songs for the 1959 film *Black Orpheus*, set out to collaborate on a musical comedy about a Martian visiting the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro. For this project, they labored on "Garota de Ipanema," a melancholy number about secret longing. The show failed to take off, but the song became a hit, first in Brazil and then internationally, thanks to a 1964 version by singer-songwriter João Gilberto and American saxophonist Stan Getz, with Astrud Gilberto singing the lyrics in English.

"The Girl from Ipanema," a prime example of the bossa nova idiom, is one of the most covered songs in recorded history, second only to the Beatles' "Yesterday." (For a historical perspective on bossa nova, see Mac Randall's feature in the November 2017 issue.) The transcription here is based on an instrumental version by Charlie Byrd, the American jazz guitarist who is credited with helping bossa nova achieve its mainstream popularity in North America, as heard on his 1965 album *Brazilian Byrd*.

Though Byrd favored the nylon-string guitar, as have most practitioners of bossa nova, this chord/melody-style arrangement will work equally well on the steel-string. Begin learning the piece by considering the form. "The Girl from Ipanema" has a classic AABA structure, with a twist: The A sections (bars 1–11 and 28–35) are the usual eight measures long, and at 16 measures, the B section (12–27) is twice the customary length. On the original recording, Byrd plays the head (melody) once and then solos on it before wrapping things up with a 12-bar improvisation.

Though dropped-D tuning is far less common in jazz than standard, Byrd uses dropped D here to brilliant effect. He begins the piece by focusing on the upper strings, but in bar 12 he plays an E♭m9 voicing that would not have been possible in standard tuning. The sound is rich and complex, but the fingering is straightforward: barre strings 1–6 with your index finger and fret strings 4, 3, and 2 with your fourth, third, and second fingers, respectively. The G♭m9 chord in bar 16 is based on this same shape, but played three frets higher. Make sure that all of the chord grips are under your fingers before tackling the piece, and count carefully, such that you nail the syncopated rhythms that are essential to this style.

Byrd's solo is both sophisticated and approachable, much of it based around chord shapes. (For more on this approach to soloing, see Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers' Weekly Workout in the March 2018 issue.) Go for a lilting, laid-back feel, isolating any tricky parts until you can play them perfectly. And as always, once you've learned the solo, use it as a template for creating your own. AG

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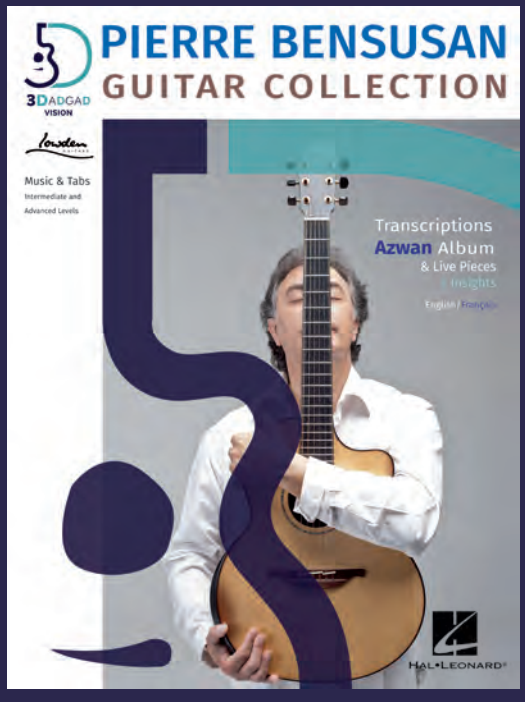


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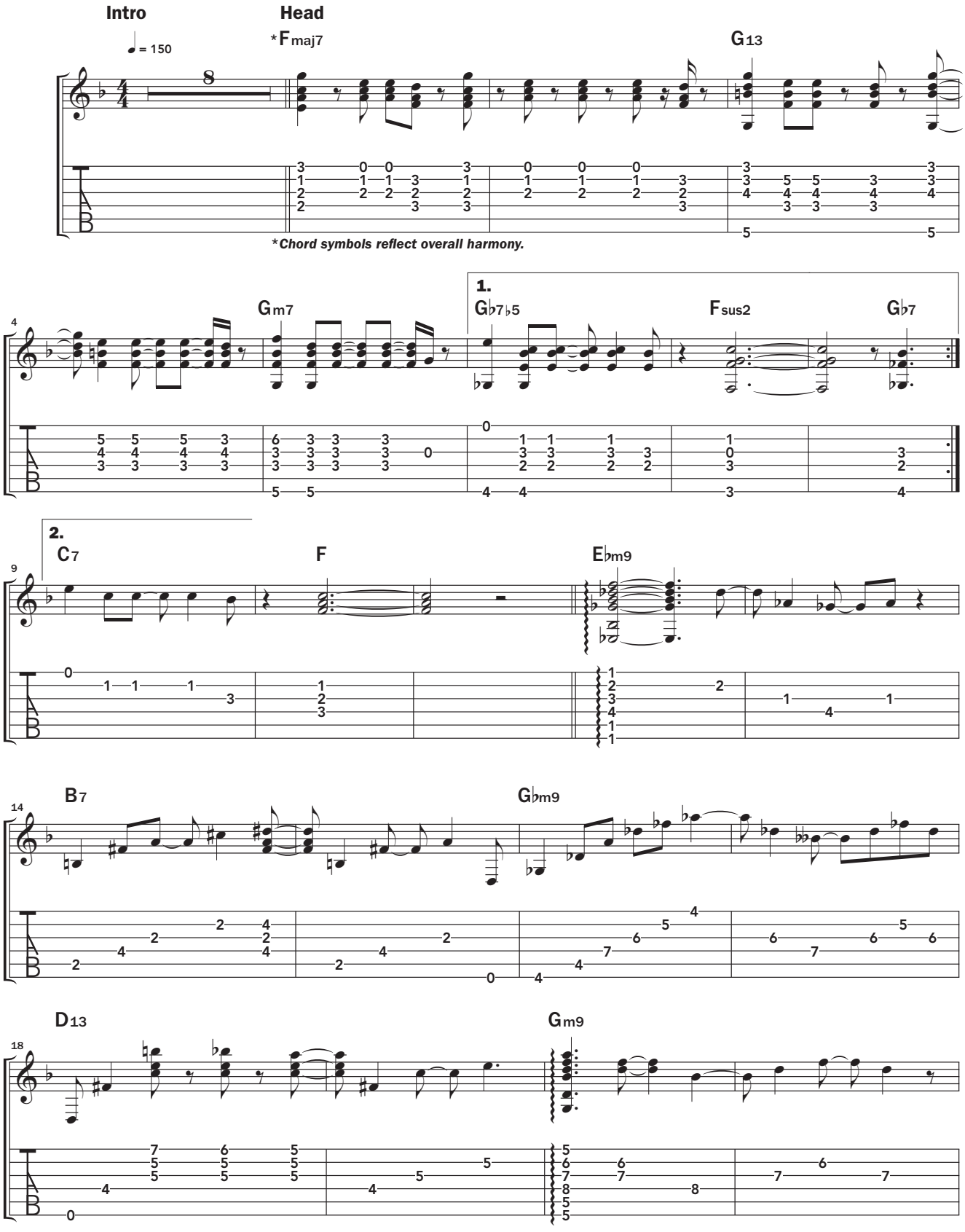


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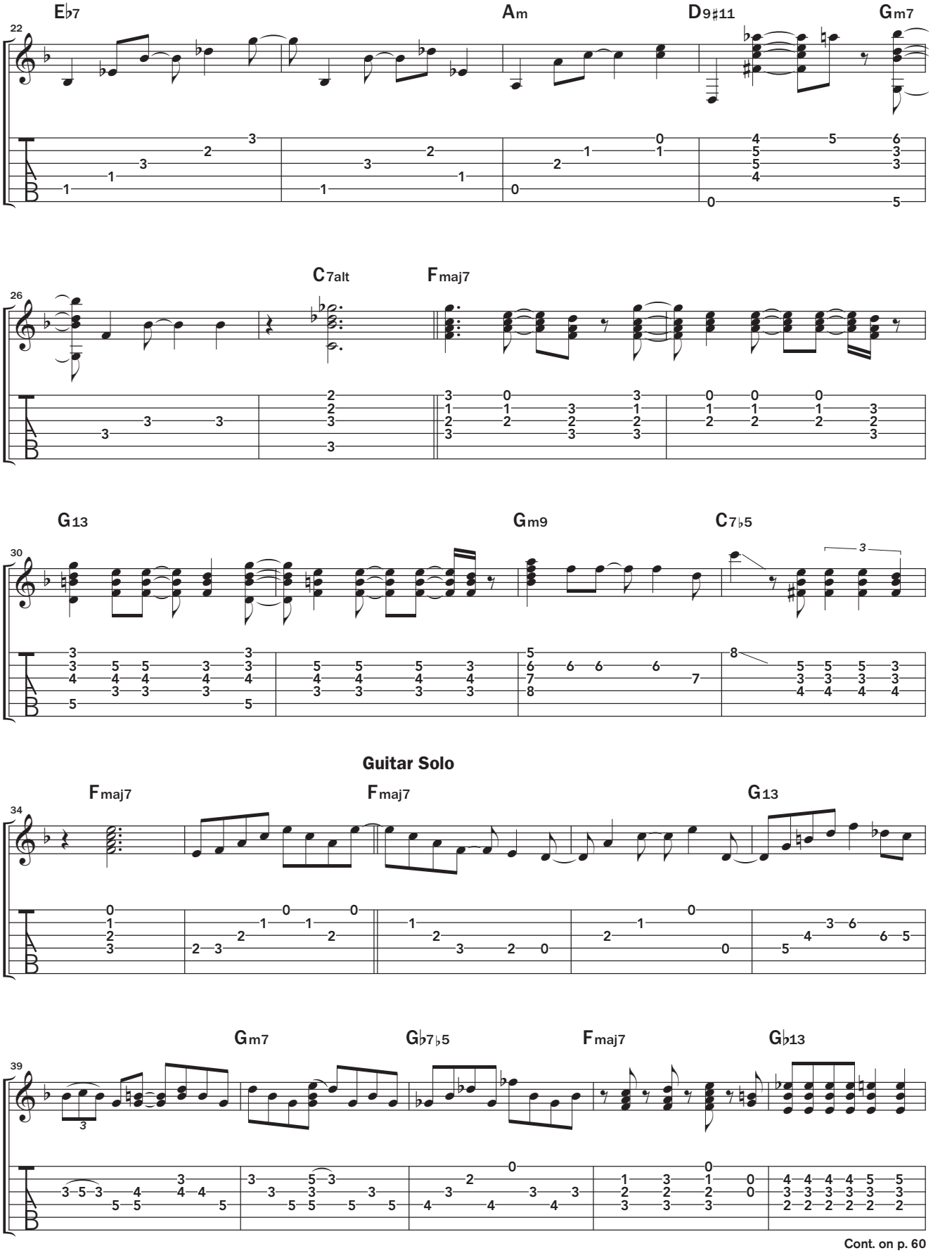
THE GIRL FROM IPANEMA

MUSIC BY ANTÔNIO CARLOS JOBIM. ENGLISH WORDS BY NORMAN GIMBEL.

Tuning: D A D G B E

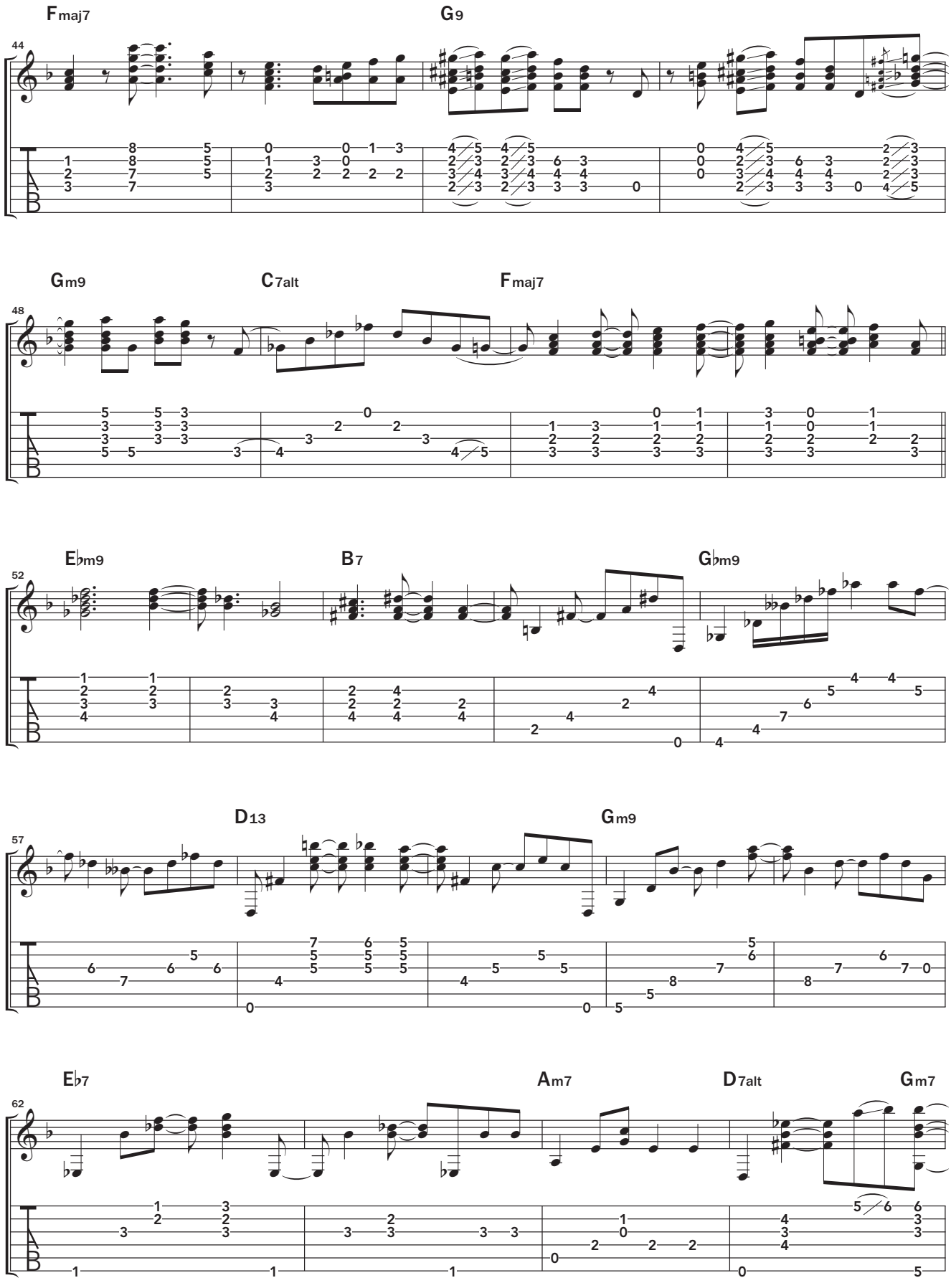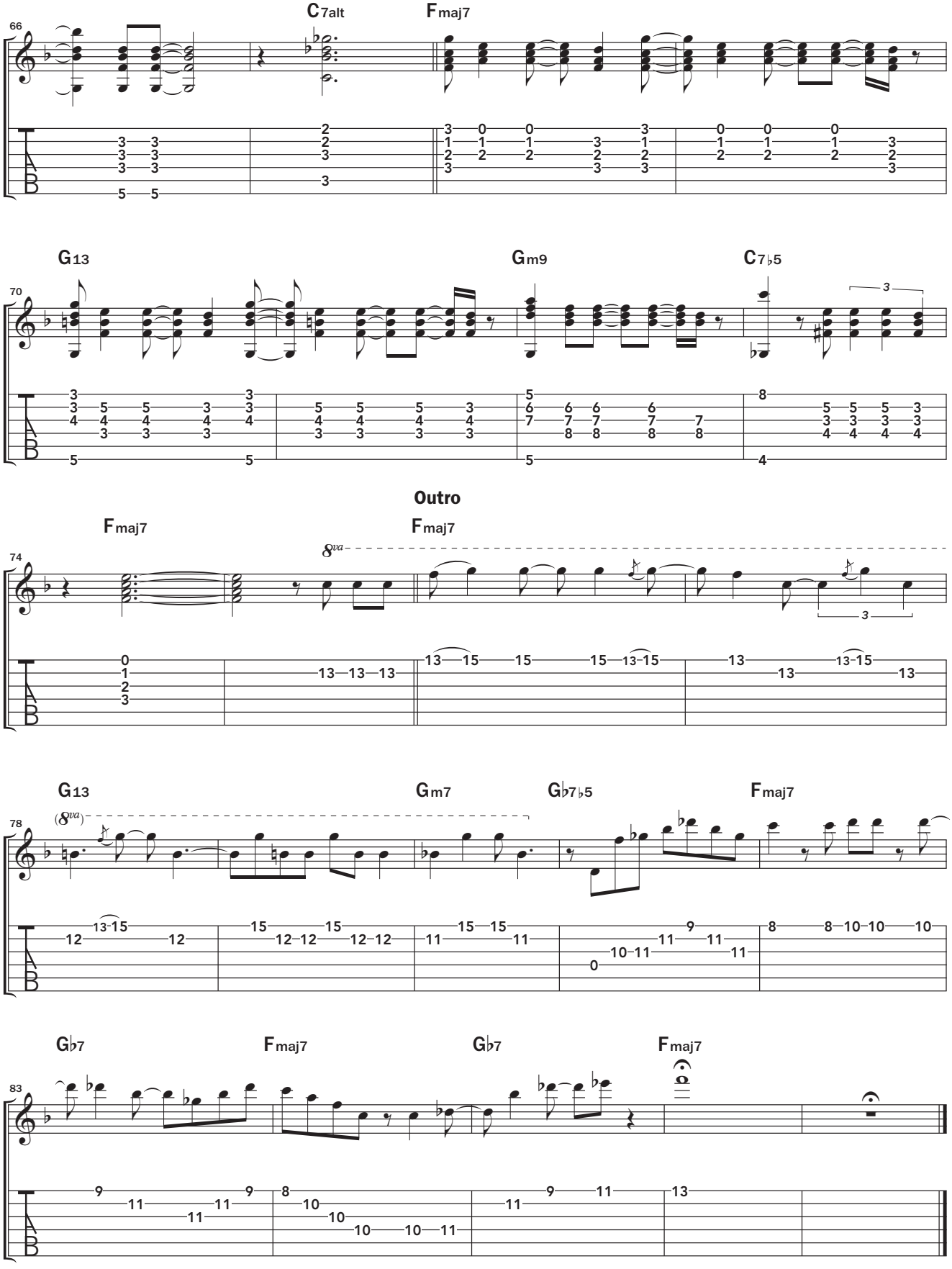


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E♭7
Am
D9♯11
Gm7
22
C7alt
Fmaj7
26
G13
Gm9
C7♭5
30
Guitar Solo
Fmaj7
Fmaj7
G13
34
Gm7
G♭7♭5
Fmaj7
G♭13
39

Cont. on p. 60

Cont. from p. 59




66
C7alt
Fmaj7
70
G13
Gm9
C7♭5
Outro
74
Fmaj7
Fmaj7
8va
78
G13
Gm7
G♭7♭5
Fmaj7
(8va)
83
G♭7
Fmaj7
G♭7
Fmaj7

Billy Strings



COURTESY OF BILLY STRINGS

Guitar Peace

Billy Strings' open-D take on Indian classical music

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

On an evening in January 2019, Billy Strings came home from a long day of tracking at Blackbird Studio in Nashville and joined his girlfriend in watching *George Harrison: Living in the Material World*, Martin Scorsese's documentary about the late singer-songwriter. "It had a lot of Ravi Shankar talking about this Indian music, which just comes from the soul and reaches down deep," Strings says.

The next day Strings returned to the studio with a riff in his head, inspired by the Shankar scenes in the film. When his collaborators took their lunch break, Strings grabbed a choice old guitar that happened to be in the studio—an early-1940s Martin 000-28. "I told our engineer [Glenn Brown] just to leave the tape rolling," Strings says. "Then I put the guitar in a weird tuning, smoked a bunch of weed, and got into the zone."

With Brown playing low droning sounds on a harmonium, Strings improvised on his riff for a good four minutes, treating it with a range of right-hand approaches, like tremolo picking, cross-picking, and string skipping, and toggling between a free sense of time and a more metered feel. "I don't even know what I was thinking; I just wanted to play from my soul, make something up on the spot, and find weird things that worked. It was a total experiment," Strings says, adding that the later inclusion of a Buchla (a type of synthesizer) provided a layer of further strangeness.
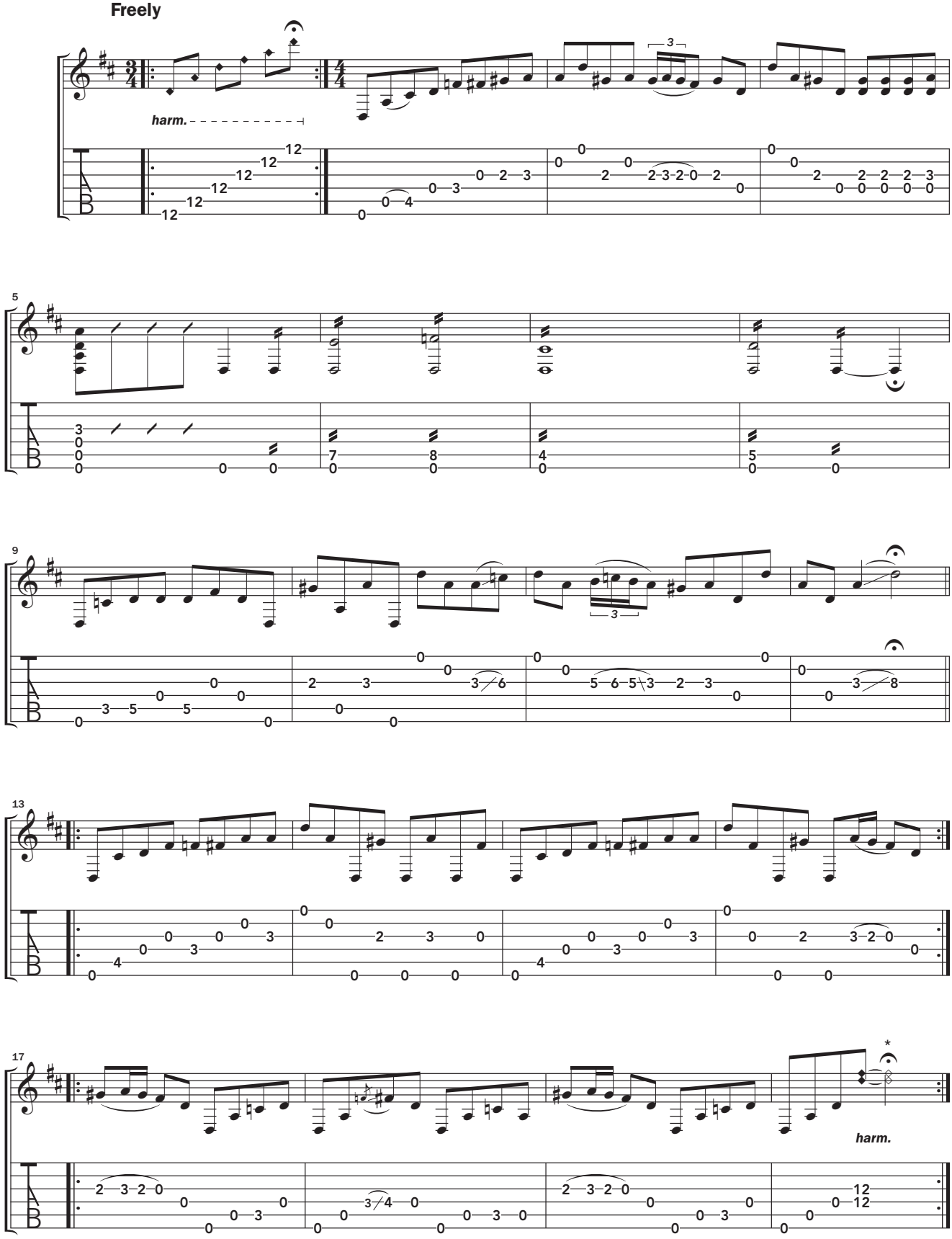
To play "Guitar Peace," which appears on Strings' 2019 album, *Home* (reviewed in the March/April 2020 issue), first tune your guitar to open D. Lower strings 1 and 2 a whole step, to D, and string 3 a half step, to F♯. If you haven't spent any time in this tuning, play around it in for a few minutes, exploring how the fretboard is transformed from standard tuning. Then, rather than trying to plow through the whole transcription, work on the main riff, which first appears in bars 13–16.

Note the lack of chord changes in the riff—in fact, the entire piece is harmonically static—and the emphasis on the raised fourth, the note G♯, elements that give the piece its Indian flavor. Focus on picking evenly and cleanly, using whatever combination of pick strokes work best for you. Let the notes ring together, and in bar 14, when you toggle between the sixth and third strings, take care to avoid accidentally sounding the interior strings.

After you can play the riff solidly at tempo, work on a few of its variations—like the phrases in bars 17–20 and 25–28, which bring pull-offs and harmonics into the mix—and anything else that captures your ear. But to really play "Guitar Peace" authentically, you'll want to improvise on Strings' riffs. To do this, he recommends, "Just try to reach into your heart and play what you feel. Play your guitar as if you're humming a melody." AG

Tuning: D A D F♯ A D

Freely
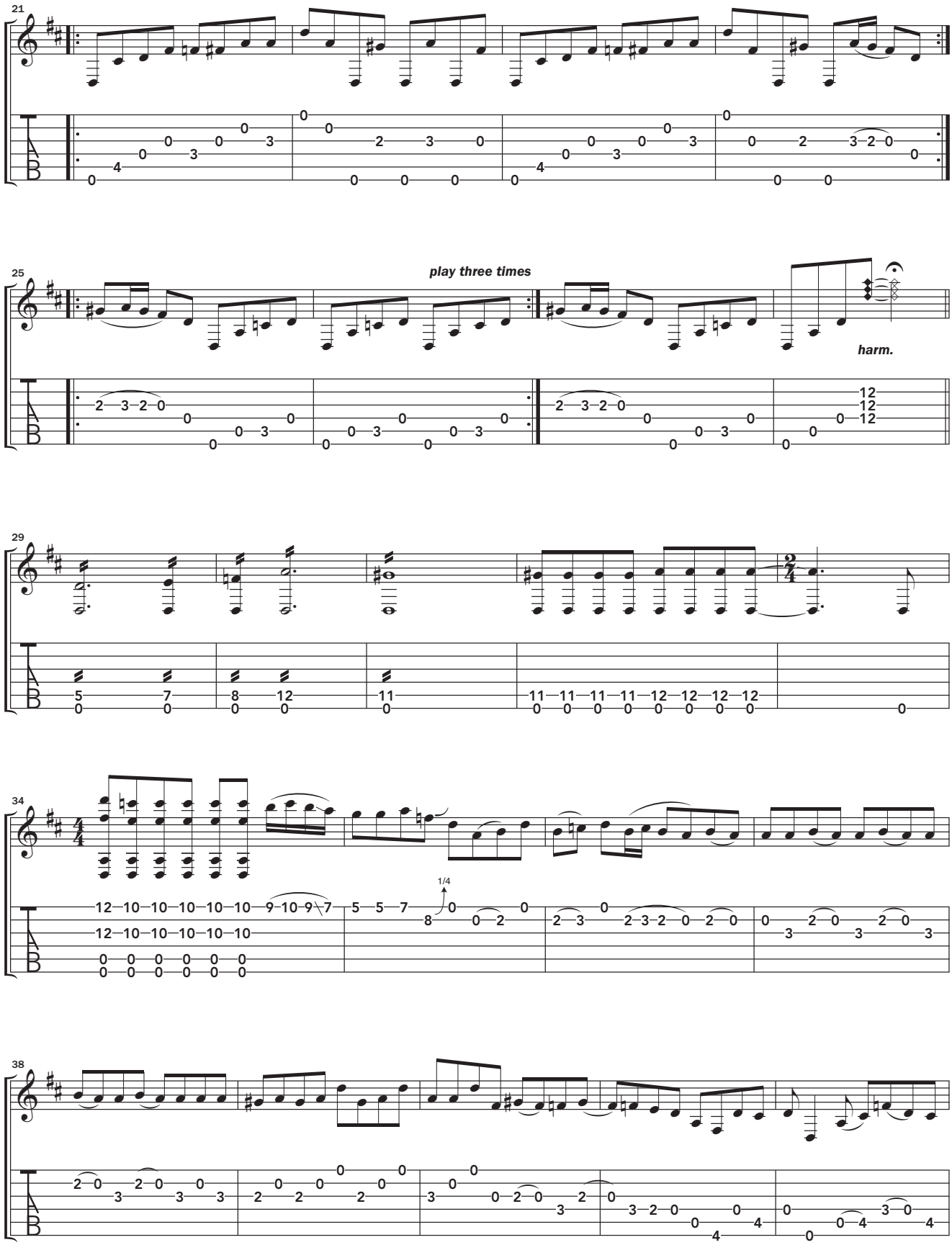


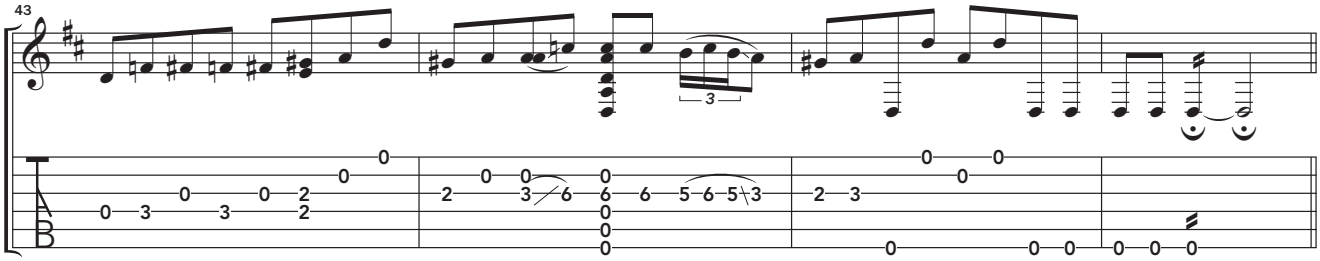
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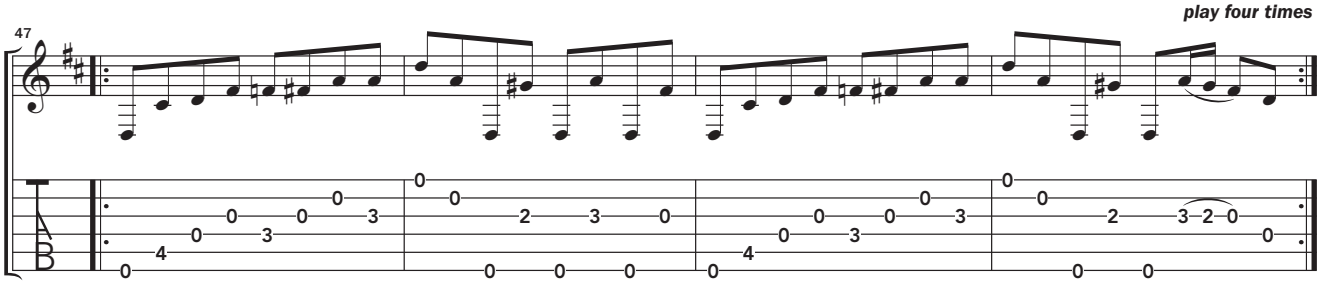
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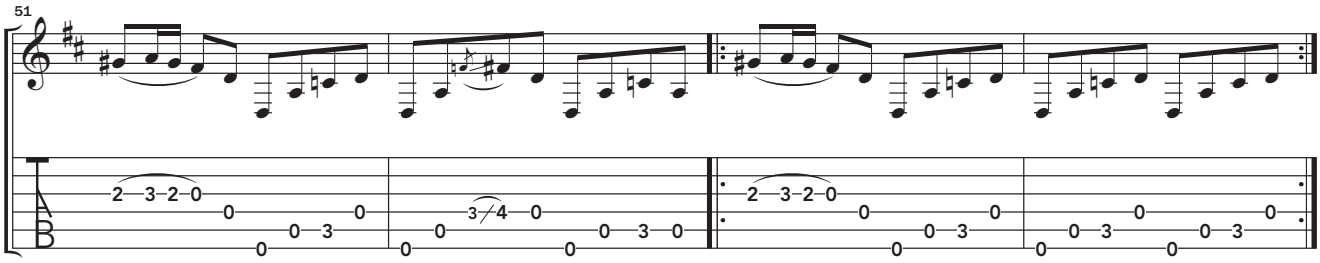
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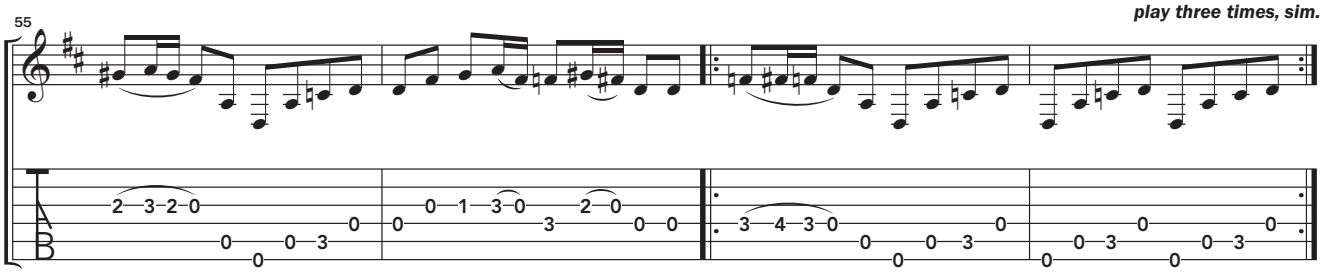
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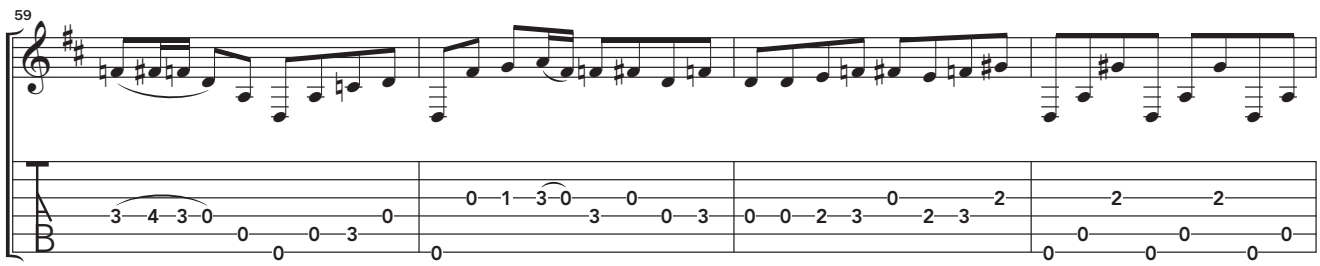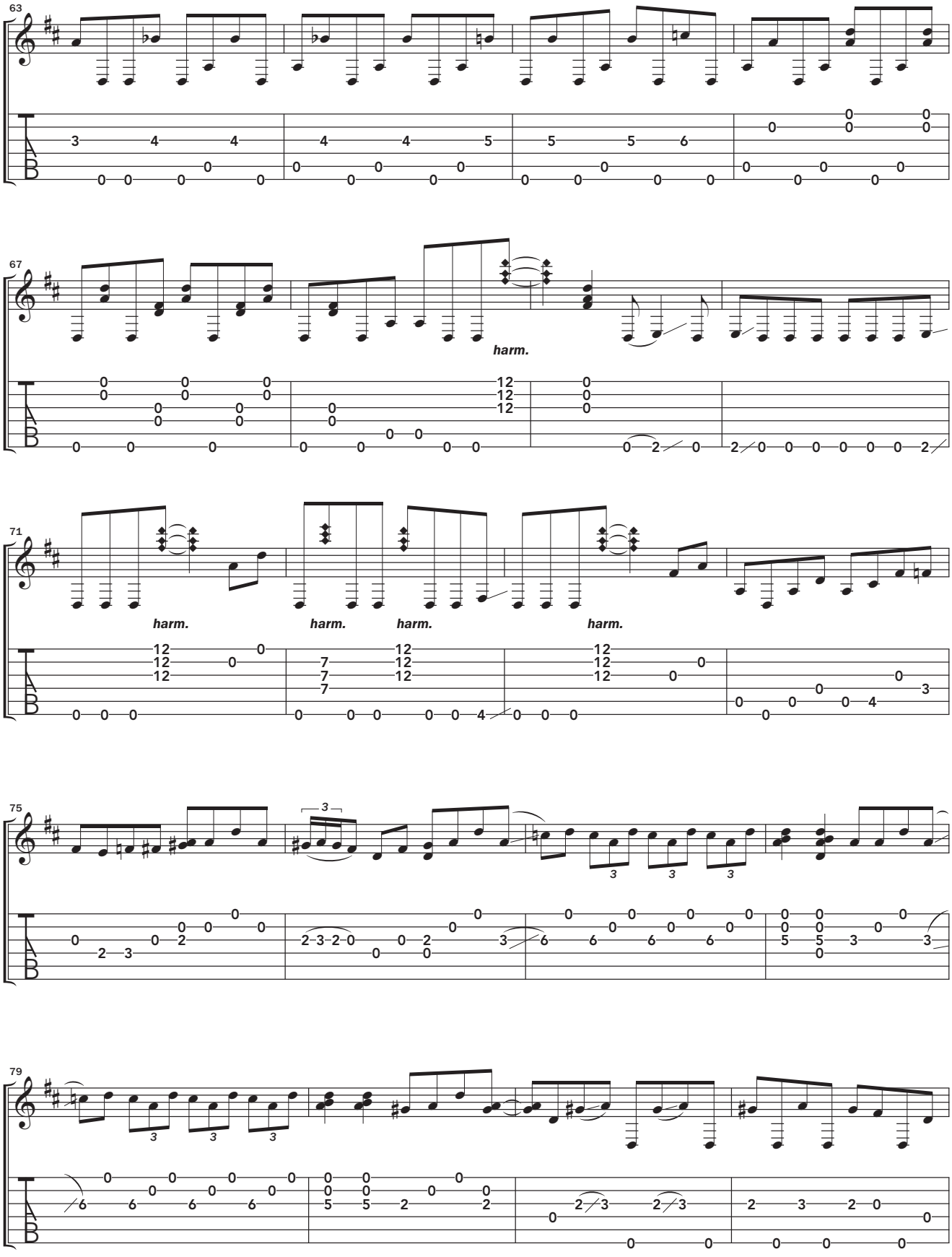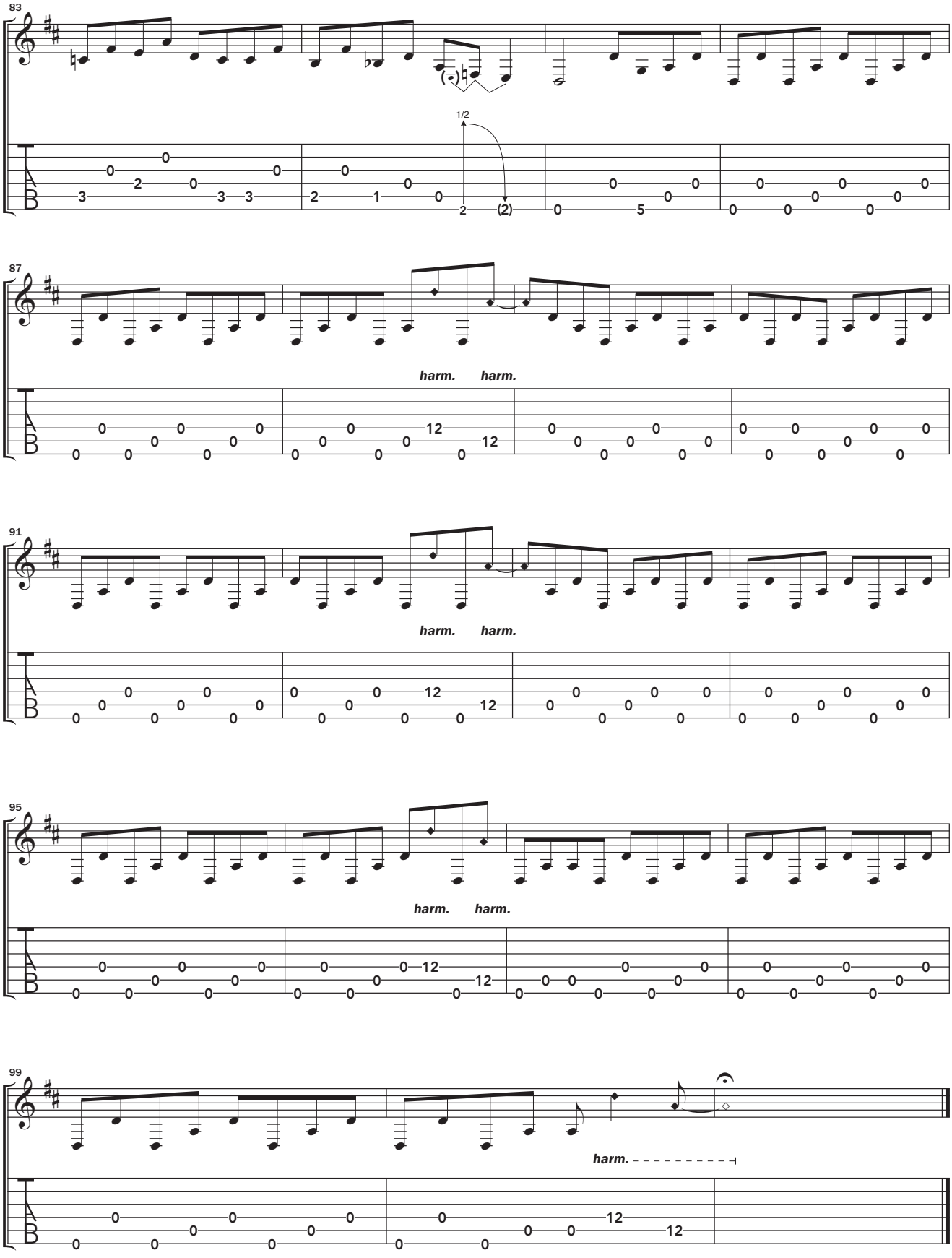












Cont on p. 66

Cont from p. 65




83
1/2
87
harm.
harm.
91
harm.
harm.
95
harm.
harm.
99
harm.

Red River Valley

An American cowboy classic, by way of Canada

BY KATE KOENIG



Maurice Tani

Given the recordings of "Red River Valley" by singers like Jimmie Rodgers, Woody Guthrie, and Connie Francis, it's reasonable to assume that the song is American in origin. However, history has left that up to debate. There are actually two Red Rivers in North America—the Red River of the North, which stretches from the Canadian province of Manitoba down between North Dakota and Minnesota, and the Red River of the South, which flows along the border of Texas and Oklahoma, down into Louisiana.

The earliest documentation of "Red River Valley" was found in Iowa in 1879, but Canadian folklorist Edith Fowke claimed that it was known in at least five Canadian provinces prior to 1896, when it first appeared in sheet music form under the title "In Bright Mohawk Valley." It's speculated that it was written during the British Wolseley Expedition to Manitoba in the 1870s and became well known on the Canadian prairies as a love song written by an indigenous Métis woman to a British soldier.

This arrangement of "Red River Valley" has a simple, repetitive chord pattern, using the I (C), IV (F), V (G), and I7 (C7) chords in the key of C major. The strumming pattern has a bouncy feel, following a boom-chuck pattern throughout. In the accompanying video by Maurice Tani (on *AG's* website), you'll notice that he really only accents the first eighth note of the "chuck," just grazing the strings on the upstroke.

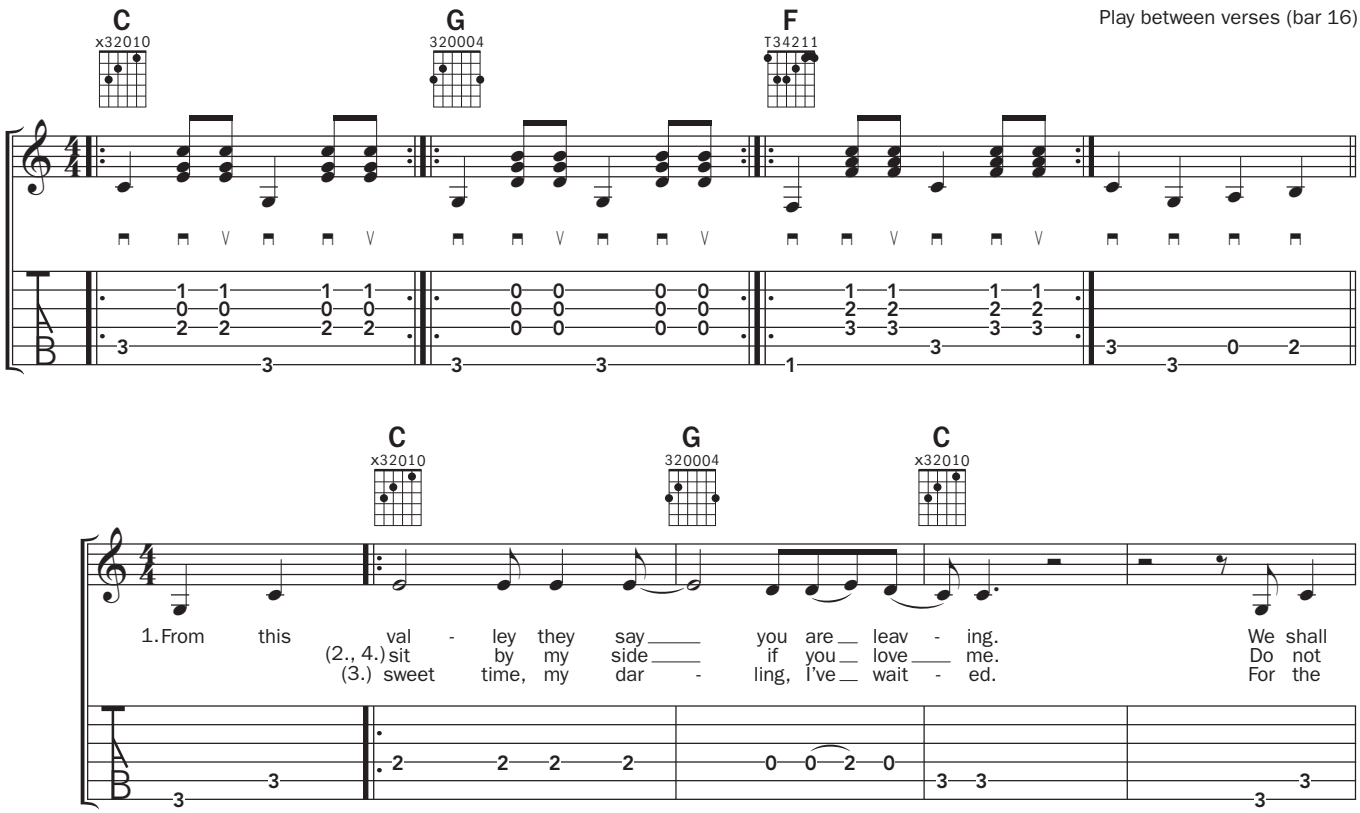
On the C and F chords, Tani alternates the bass between strings 5 and 6. For the C form, he moves his third finger back and forth between 5 and 6 at the third fret. As he notes in the video, he likes to play F a little differently, by wrapping his thumb around the neck to fret the F on the low E string, playing the rest of the shape with his remaining fingers. In terms of alternating the bass on the F, Tani goes back and forth between strings 6 and 5 without changing the shape, getting the most mileage from an already efficient grip. AG

RED RIVER VALLEY — TRADITIONAL
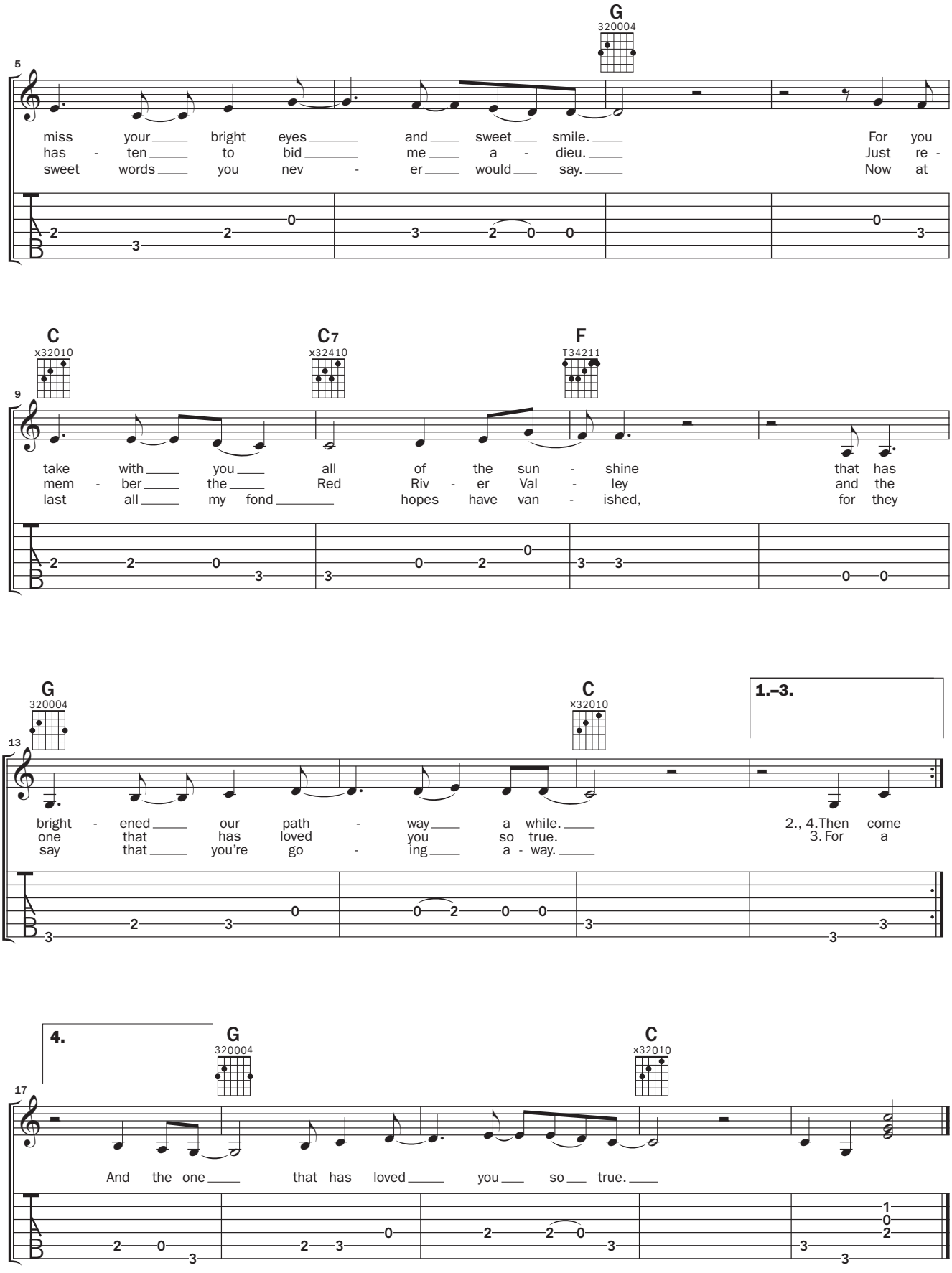
Basic Strumming Pattern

Walk-up

Play between verses (bar 16)
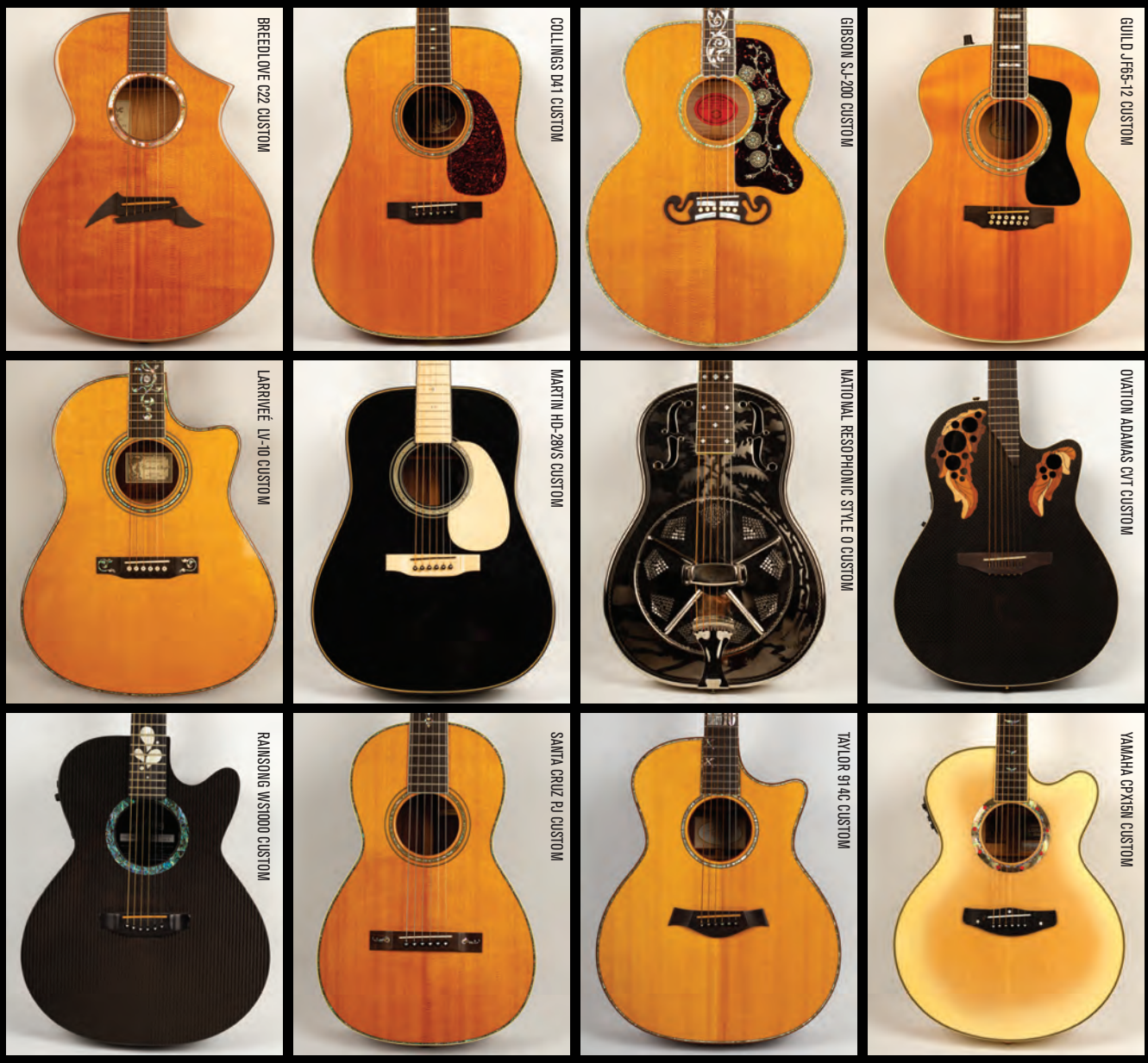


This arrangement copyright © 2020 String Letter Publishing


G
320004
5
miss your bright eyes and sweet smile. For you
has - ten to bid me a - dieu. Just re -
sweet words you nev - er would say. Now at
C
x32010
C7
x32410
F
T34211
9
take with you all of the sun - shine that has
mem - ber the Red Riv - er Val - ley and the
last all my fond hopes have van - ished, for they
G
320004
C
x32010
1.–3.
13
bright - ened our path - way a while. 2., 4.Then come
one that has loved you so true. 3. For a
say that you're go - ing a - way.
4.
G
320004
C
x32010
17
And the one that has loved you so true.

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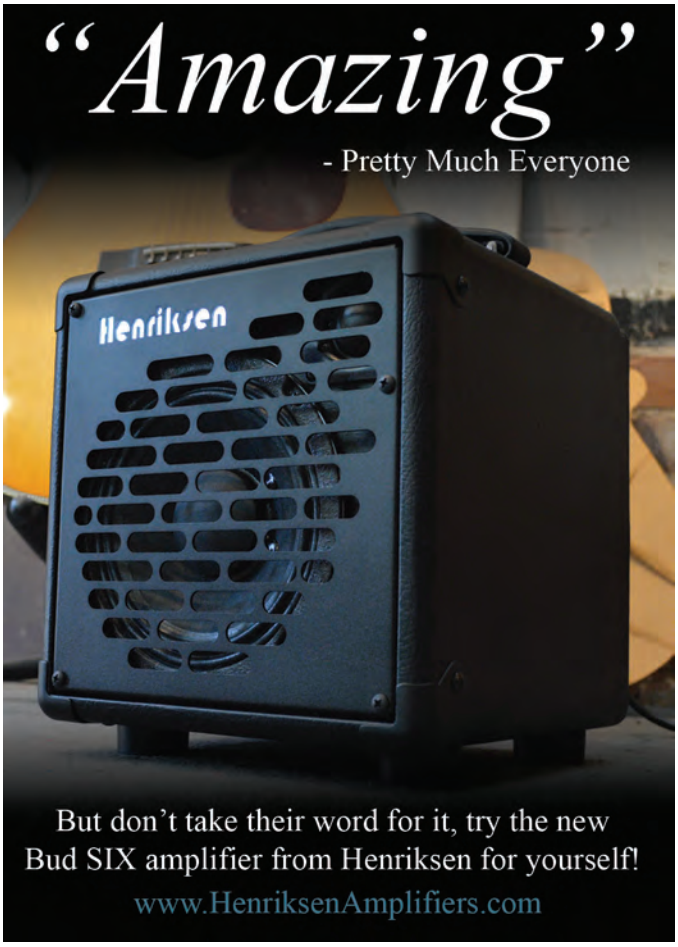
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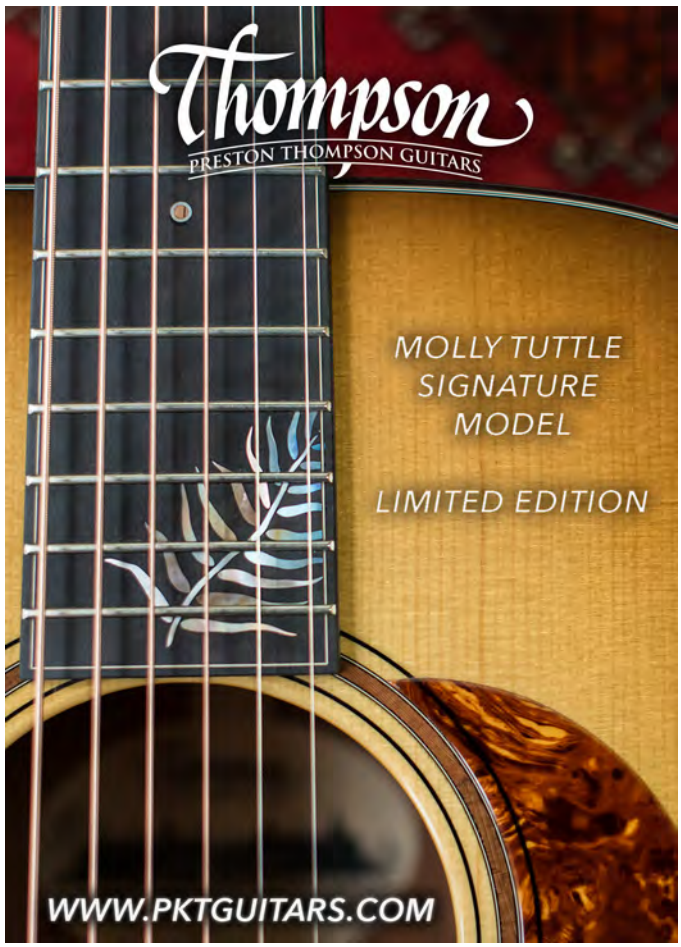


Written by BRIAN WHITEHOUSE

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An Artist's Eye

Audrey Bartlett brings a background in sculpture to her work at Waterloo Guitars

BY KATE KOENIG

Audrey Bartlett, the lead builder and department manager of Waterloo Guitars, in Austin, Texas, says, "I'm not a musician—which makes me different from most of the people doing this work." That can make her feel like she doesn't fit in, but also sets her apart for its parallels to her line of work.

It's unusual that Bartlett didn't have any background in lutherie before she started working at Waterloo's parent company, Collings. What she did have was experience working with her hands, specifically as an art major at Sam Houston State University, in Huntsville, Texas. Learning on the job at Collings in her early 20s, she found that the work's demand for acute tactile dexterity, a trained eye for the smallest details, and sensitivity to the physical natures of building materials made the guitar factory the perfect environment for her. "Early on, I became the person who other people started to bring things to, like 'Is this is okay? What should I do about this?'"

'It's not about building a less perfect guitar; it's about emulating a certain look.'
–AUDREY BARTLETT

For those unfamiliar, Collings introduced Waterloo Guitars in 2014. The lineup features instruments that take their cue from budget Depression-era models, both visually and tonally, and, like Collings guitars, are well-made and highly playable. Not long after Waterloo's auspicious debut, Bartlett was asked to take over as department manager. Her work speaks for itself, with the instruments receiving a consistently positive response. (See *AG*'s reviews in the August 2016, August 2017, and September/October 2019 issues.) Not long ago, Bartlett stepped away from her workbench to share her insights and experiences in the field.

How did you get into doing this work?

I moved to Austin when I was 22 [in 2007] without any ideas about what I wanted to do—I was just getting by on basic survival stuff like waiting tables. But I ended up randomly meeting a woman who worked here at Collings. I said, "That sounds amazing—how did you start doing that?" And she said, "Well you should give them a call, they might hire you." It seemed wild, but it's not like I was loving waiting tables, so I thought I would give it a shot. Collings had me in for a trial day, and that same week had me buffing the finishes on electric guitars.

Did you have any experience with that kind of work before this job?

No, not really. It all pretty much comes from my work here at Collings. But my dad had a shop when I was a kid, and every once in a while he would let me do something, like cut wood very carefully on the saw. So I wasn't super intimidated by shop tools because I did grow up adjacent to them. I've always been a very hands-on person; I was an art major in college, with an emphasis on sculpture. I really liked making intricate replicas of real-life objects and spent a lot of time on the little stuff. That was helpful, because buffing is the most meticulous work, and you have to train your eyes to see the flaws because they're so minute. I remember having my first guitar inspected and they're circling up all these spots with a grease pencil like, "You need to go back over this," and I would look at it in the light and it just looked like a circle. Then, a couple months in, something in your eye just kind of clicks.

How did you go from buffing to becoming the manager of Waterloo?

Well, it's been 12 years, so there's a lot of learning that happened in between. I buffed for a couple of years, and over time I started pestering my superiors to teach me something else, and I ended up in the body build department. Then, after working at Collings for almost five years, I got restless and wanted to do something totally different, so I left. I thought maybe cabinetry or some other form of woodworking would be fulfilling. But I found myself at each of those jobs talking about how cool my old job was, so I came back and Bill [Collings] started the Waterloo department around the same time.

I moved over to Waterloo and did production work for a few years just building bodies, then my colleague who was managing it got moved to head the Collings acoustic setup department. I've always just thought of myself

as a worker, so when they called me to the office to offer me the job, I was really intimidated. If they hadn't come to me with it, I wouldn't have asked. But I just decided to go for it.

What do your responsibilities look like now as department manager?
Right now it's a team of just three of us. I'm still building the acoustic bodies, my friend Greg Pauza is building necks, and Matt Duncan is setting and fretting them and doing the in-between stuff. I just keep everything organized, delegate responsibilities, and we all work together like a breeze. Then I'm in charge of the final inspection, making sure everything is how it needs to be, and I glue in the necks and send the guitars on their way to finish.

I love the concept of Waterloo—it feels like there's a real commitment to capturing the vintage aesthetic, more so than just remaking classic models.
The cosmetic decisions—the glue that's left behind, the knots in the wood—are all very intentional. It's not about building a less perfect guitar; it's about emulating a certain look. Bill wanted you to be able to look inside of the soundhole and see the glue and flaws, because that was part of the aesthetic. But the sound and the structure and the quality are still very important. And the thing with Collings guitars is they're just stunningly beautiful and perfect. Every detail has been considered, even stuff you would only be able to see with a light and a dental mirror. With Waterloo, Bill wanted to step away from that energy and put it elsewhere. And I think he achieved that.

What was it like to work for Bill Collings?
If you had a question for him, Bill was really good about spending time and going into great detail about why something is the way it is. Even when I was just in buffing he would come through and tell me I was doing it all wrong and grab my sanding block and show me the right way to do it. He was a very dynamic personality, as anyone who knew him could tell you. He was, of course, still with us when I started in on Waterloo, and it was really important to him that they followed the certain idea that he had in his mind. [Collings died in 2017 at the age of 68.] Waterloo is different from Collings, but it is very Bill.

Your background in sculpture, as opposed to lutherie or music, must make your experience on the job very different.
Yeah—I still can't really hang whenever they all start talking about their favorite Martin and what pickup sounds best and whatnot. I don't know anything about pickups [*laughs*]. It has nothing to do with the job that I have to do in front of me. But it is important that it sounds good when it gets to the end of the line. I'm pretty sure if it didn't, somebody would tell me [*laughs*]. I think that's just how dialed-in Bill had things when he and the team put it together, that you could teach someone exactly how to make things—the thicknesses of the angles, the materials, the carve of the braces. There's very little room for error. We have to get things within a thousandth of an inch at every turn.

But the thing that really makes this job different is the people who work here. I think that's what has kept me here and what brought me back after leaving. It's just a great group of people who are really funny, strange, and goodhearted. AG





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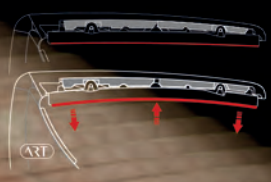
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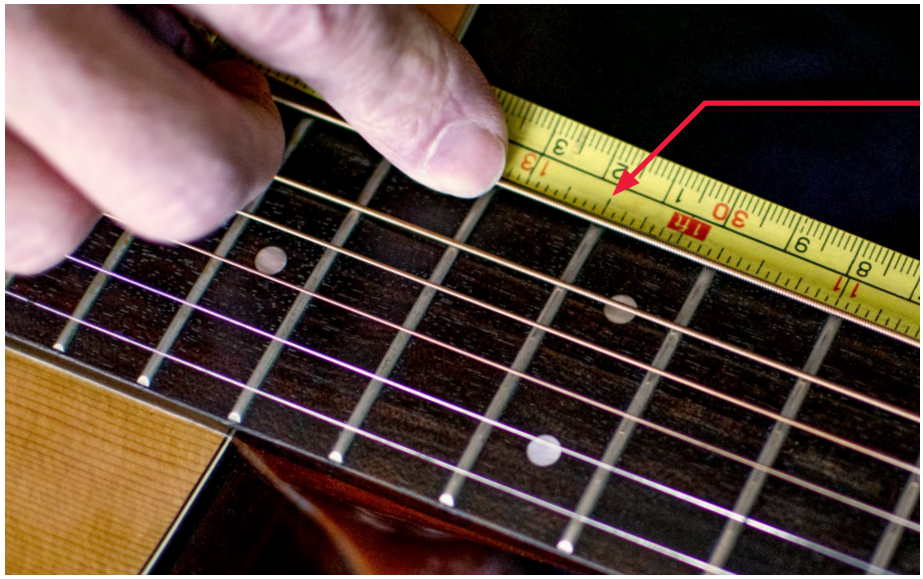
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A Matter of Scale

How fretboard length affects your guitar's sound and playability

BY MARTIN KEITH

To determine your guitar's scale, measure from the nut to the 12th fret and double that number.



JACKIE ANDREWS

Q: *I need your help to understand scale length. Why are there so many different variations, how is scale length measured, and how does it affect the tone of the guitar? What gauge strings are best for different scale lengths? Why should this measurement matter to me, and how should it factor in when shopping for a guitar?*

—Bob Lang, Starksboro, VT

A: Thanks for the questions! Scale length is an often overlooked design variable that has a considerable impact on the sound and feel of the guitar. Earlier in my career, I worked with Veillette Guitars, a company that specializes in unusual scales and tunings, so this topic is one I particularly enjoy.

In the simplest terms, scale length refers to the length of the active/vibrating portion of the open string, between the nut and saddle. Among acoustic guitars, the most common scales are clustered around 25.4–25.5 inches and 24.75 inches. However, to determine the scale of a guitar, you can't just measure from nut to saddle, since the bridge saddle positions are moved or compensated away from the theoretical scale point to correct intonation. The most accurate way to calculate scale is to measure the distance from the nut to the center of the 12th fret and double the result.

The basic rule of scale length is simple: For any given tuning and set of strings, longer scales have higher tension. Once again, it's important to note that this only applies to the area of string that is vibrating between the nut and saddle. The string beyond those points (called the afterlength in violin-family instruments) can affect aspects of how the string feels, as a greater afterlength offers more stretch than a short one, but does not impact the tension of the string at its target pitch.

When doing a setup, scale length is an important consideration. Instruments with shorter scales can be more demanding for a number of reasons: The lower tension means fret buzzes can be caused more easily, and the intonation is often trickier to dial in accurately. A player accustomed to low action on a 25.5-inch fretboard may be comfortable with slightly higher action on a 24.625-inch instrument, whereas someone who usually plays short scales may want to choose a lighter string gauge if they buy a longer-scale guitar.

It's not uncommon for players to wonder how much difference a change of 3/4 of an inch or less really makes. Let's consider the overall tension of a typical light (.012–.053) string set. On a 25.5-inch scale fretboard, the combined tension at standard tuning is 160.5 lbs., whereas at 24.75 inches the tension is 151.24. Therefore, a three-percent change in scale length can result in a six-percent change in tension. By comparison, a set of .011–.052 strings adds up to 148.6 pounds. The result is that the tension of .012s on the shorter scale will be very comparable to the .011s on the longer scale.

Alongside string tension, you must also consider string flexibility. Thicker strings are less flexible, as are shorter lengths of string. As a string loses its flexibility, it starts to exhibit less accurate intonation, which is once again why the thick low strings require greater compensation than the thin high strings. Excessively stiff strings also tend to sound less musical, with odd harmonics and overtones that don't relate to the notes being played.

Low bass notes, therefore, are better reproduced with long strings than with short ones, as the length allows a thinner, more flexible string to be used. Treble strings, on the other hand, can sound thin, harsh, and unpleasant if the tension is too high, and many players favor the warm, thick tone of the trebles on shorter scales. Therefore, the builder and player must find the happy medium between clean, well-behaved bass strings and pleasant, musical trebles by choosing the best combination of scale and string gauges. The ideal example of this is the grand piano, which uses a much longer scale length for the low bass strings than the treble strings. Imagine how different the strings would need to be in order to make that range work with a single scale length!

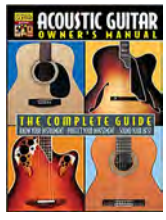
Although the guitar has considerably less range than the piano, there are still cases where a shorter scale is not ideally suited for the player's needs—these might include extended tunings with low D or C notes, or guitars with more than six strings. In an attempt to improve



Martin Keith

GOT A QUESTION?

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If *AG* selects your question for publication, you'll receive a complimentary copy of *AG*'s *Acoustic Guitar Owner's Manual.*

bass-string response without compromising the quality of the high notes, some modern makers offer multiscale or fan-fretted instruments, which have longer bass string scales and shorter trebles. Such instruments have frets that are not parallel, which can be a bit intimidating at first glance, but this design is gaining popularity with players who appreciate the more even tension and response it can offer with extended-range tunings. California luthier Ralph Novak is widely credited with proving and popularizing this innovative approach in the custom guitar world, and larger manufacturers are now following suit with production multiscale instruments.

Paying attention to scale length when shopping for a guitar can be very helpful. Some guitars will just feel right, and the scale is often a big part of that. The fret-to-fret variation between different scales is fairly small—for example, between the two scales discussed above, the difference in distance between the first and second frets is only 40 thousandths of an inch. But even these small differences can be felt and appreciated by most players. For a guitarist who has always played Gibsons, for example, the longer scale of a Martin dreadnought or OM may well take some adjustment. Keeping this in mind when evaluating and comparing guitars allows the player to make more accurate judgments about which aspects of the guitar are impacting the playing experience—action can be lowered, but scale length is fixed, and if a guitar feels uncomfortable, it is useful and important to understand why.

Guitar designers often adjust scale length to optimize an instrument for a particular purpose—for example, jazz archtops with pickups often have shorter scales, which yield thicker, warmer sounding trebles and warm basses with a smooth attack. By contrast, a builder aiming for the bluegrass flatpicker market will likely use a longer scale to get the added punch and volume that the higher string tension can produce. When building a long-scale guitar, the builder must also anticipate the higher tension and brace accordingly, or the instrument may not survive in the long term. This is one reason many fingerstyle players have gravitated towards 00- and 000-style guitars, as their shorter scale (24.9 inches) permits lighter bracing, which yields a more sensitive and dynamic instrument.

At the extreme end of the scale spectrum are baritone guitars (see "Taking on the Tweener" in the March/April 2020 issue), which usually range from 27–30 inches in scale and are designed to be tuned down as far as a fifth below a standard guitar. The heavier string gauges, combined with the long scale, can make the low notes on these guitars quite impressive—and help to illustrate the combined effect of gauge and scale on the quality and character of the guitar's tone. Capoing a baritone back up to E will result in the same tuning as a standard guitar, but with a very different timbre and tone.

Scale length is one of the fundamental building blocks of a guitar's recipe, with a wide-ranging impact on the feel, tone, and performance. Understanding how it interacts with your setup, string choice, and playing style will make it much easier to properly adjust your guitar, and may help guide you towards an instrument that feels just right.

Martin Keith is a luthier, repair and restoration expert, and working musician based in Woodstock, New York. martinkeithguitars.com



Preston Thompson 000-14SBA

The ultimate modern triple-0, made from the finest materials

BY GREG OLWELL

The power and magic of a prewar steel-string guitar is often reduced to the presence of choice materials like Brazilian rosewood and Adirondack spruce, which were once plentiful but are now difficult to find in any quantity—and nearly impossible to source in the quality that was commonplace in the first half of the 20th century. This has led more than a few guitarists to shop by spec sheet, which doesn't always work as expected. Sometimes even Adirondack spruce and Brazilian rosewood just don't deliver dynamic performance on a new guitar, no matter how well-crafted.

The Thompson 000-14SBA is a meticulously made, flawless piece of gorgeousness that will make guitarists dewy-eyed just to behold it.

There are, however, a few contemporary builders who consistently deliver exceptional-sounding guitars using tonewoods that seem to have been gathered through time travel. Carrying on the work of company founder and namesake Preston K. Thompson, who died April 11, 2019, the small cadre of builders at Preston Thompson Guitars, in Sisters, Oregon, is one of those teams that's capable of delivering extraordinarily crafted steel-strings time and again, and this Thompson 000-14SBA is one of those fine instruments.

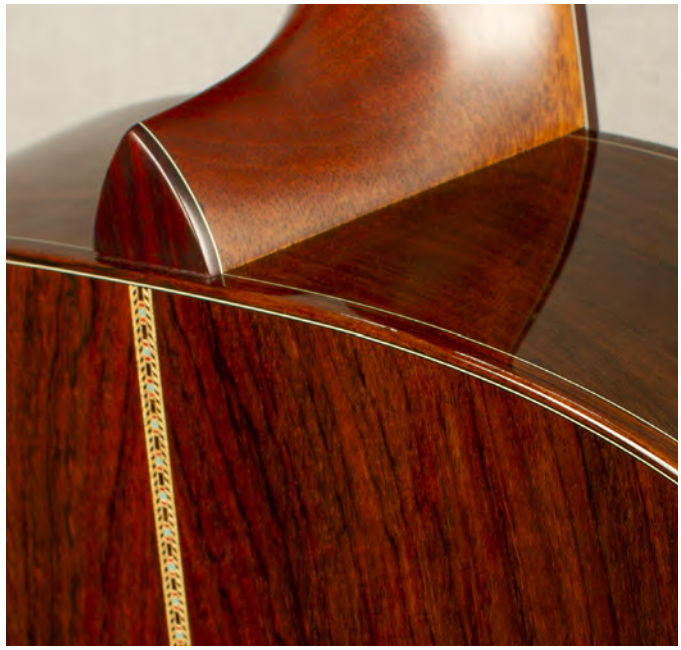


Preston Thompson 000-14SBA

NO EXPENSE SPARED

Our test model is a 000, auditorium-sized guitar, and as such shares body dimensions with the standard orchestra size but has a shorter (24.9-inch)-scale neck and 1-3/4-inch-wide nut, which may suit fingerpickers or players looking for a little more fretting-hand space. The soundboard is made from the kind of tight-grained Adirondack spruce seen on the finest prewar instruments. And the vintage





SPECS

BODY 000-size, 14-fret; Adirondack spruce top and shipwreck Brazilian rosewood back and sides; Adirondack advanced X-bracing, prewar scalloped-style; Brazilian rosewood binding with abalone top trim; tortoiseshell pickguard; gloss with vintage toner

NECK 24.9"-scale mahogany with adjustable trussrod, soft-V profile; 1-3/4"-wide at bone nut; ebony fingerboard with 41-style abalone inlay and Brazilian rosewood binding and BWB purfling; Brazilian rosewood peghead overlay with "The Regency" torch inlay and mother-of-pearl logo; Waverly relic tuners; satin finish

OTHER Ebony belly bridge with compensated bone drop-in saddle; bone nut; Elixir phosphor bronze strings with Nanoweb coating (.012–.053); Harptone hardshell case

MADE IN USA

PRICE $15,490 street, as reviewed; $13,100 base, plus 41-style appointments ($2,390)

pktguitars.com

toner in the top's finish feels warm and integral, making it look less like a new guitar with a fake tan than one that's decades old.

The back and sides are made from beautifully grained, colorful Brazilian rosewood, recovered from a ship that sank off the Spanish coast in 1936, as it was delivering the wood to Danish furniture makers. This salvaged Brazilian doesn't have the straight grain you'd find on, say, a prewar Martin, but it's obviously very high-quality stuff, making it ideally suited to a high-end guitar like this Thompson.

While the wood is commanding all of the attention here, it must be said that the review model's 41-style abalone ornamentation (a $2,390 option) adds a lot of visual beauty. The shell surrounding the body and soundhole have a lot of soothing green hues, shimmering with purples, blues, and white, and the headstock's torch inlay adds a regal touch.

AN ABUNDANCE OF PRESENCE AND TONE

As I fingerpicked chords, the Thompson's immediate bass response punched my ribcage. But more than just a boom, the overtones and notes on the higher strings seemed to float on top of that thick, tight foundation of the lower notes. The effect heightened as I dug in looking for this guitar's headroom. I found that the Thompson's dynamic range was there for delicate fingerpickers and brutes alike. It's not going to create the banjo-killing volume of some dreadnoughts, but this guitar has enough horsepower to keep up with most situations.

This power at your fingertips is more than just for keeping up with others. The feeling I get playing this guitar is that it's ready for whatever direction I might turn next, and indeed its ability to serve up luscious sounds quickly seemed only to increase the more I played it. The neck has a nice, full shape that is meatier than some, but far from bulky, and I immediately loved its fit in my hand and its silky finish.

The setup is outstanding, as you should expect for a guitar costing this much; overall, the Thompson is one of the most inviting, easy-to-play guitars I can remember spending time with. The finish and setup show that a lot of work went into making the instrument easy to enjoy—whether playing it or listening to it, as I found when I heard a few other guitarists try it. Even rudimentary chords from a beginner-level player were enough to stop me in my tracks with their uncommon abundance of presence and tone.

CRAFT AND SOUND

Several questions come up when reviewing a new $15,000 guitar—and they add a layer of scrutiny to the review. What does the instrument offer you that you can't get for considerably less? I can easily narrow it down to two criteria: craft and sound. The Thompson 000-14SBA is a meticulously made, flawless piece of gorgeousness that will make guitarists dewy-eyed just to behold it. Then, once you begin to play the guitar, you find it's nearly effortless, and the tone it creates makes you say, "Okay, I get it." It plays so sweetly and sounds so good that it brings the flaws of other guitars into focus. It's a wonderful instrument, a piece of craft, and tribute to the dedication and skill of Preston Thompson. AG

Lowden WL-35 Jazz

Small in stature and big in sound

BY MARK GOLDENBERG

The venerable Irish luthier George Lowden has been building fine instruments for over 40 years. Lowden guitars inhabit a world of their own, with unique sounds and sizes and forms that seem familiar but don't invite immediate comparisons to standard shapes. These instruments share somewhat of a common tonality, with crystalline, bell-like highs, rich in overtones, yet with a roundness to the mids and bottom; very seductive. I played a number of Lowdens at the 2020 Winter NAMM show, and all had great setups, very high build quality, and lovely voices. Impressive, to say the least.

The WL-35 Jazz I checked out after NAMM is part of the Wee Lowden range, as the name suggests, the smallest instruments the company offers. Parlor-sized and outfitted with nylon strings and an L.R. Baggs pickup system, the WL-35 is an excellent fit for steel-string guitarists looking to expand their palettes with the warm tonality of nylon strings. Aside from the compact body, this guitar departs from the traditional classical guitar in several significant ways: Its neck joins the body at the 14th fret, as opposed to the expected 12th; the fretboard's scale length is short at 610mm (24 inches), and the nut is narrow as well. Different—but great.



Lowden WL-35 Jazz

TASTEFUL AND UNDERSTATED

The review model WL-35 Jazz is made from a gorgeous selection of tonewoods. Its AAAA Alpine spruce top, sourced from Italy, is beautiful and almost white in color with not much figure, just a lovely and serene piece of wood. The back and sides are AAAA Guatemalan rosewood—toffee-colored with lots of grain—and the two back pieces are artfully book-matched, with a hypnotic pattern that I spent a little too much time staring at. An attractive center seam of purpleheart and walnut is seen in the mahogany neck, and the fingerboard sports elegant maple binding, which is repeated on the body's top and back.

The guitar's appointments are tasteful and understated. A simple abalone rosette is complemented by a thin band of purfling, comprised of pau ferro, maple, and mahogany. The headstock









retains the characteristic Lowden profile with a nice dark ebony veneer, and the body and neck have a satin finish that's perfectly applied and luminous, with just a hint of gloss. Also, unlike the standard classical guitar, the test model came outfitted with a clear pickguard, so I think Willie Nelson could have a go at it.

My first reaction was that the guitar sounded bigger than it looked, and I found it hard to put down.

Unsurprisingly, the overall build quality of the WL-35 Jazz is superb; I couldn't find a single flaw in the instrument. The perfectly articulated bridge has a modern tie block, with two holes per string, allowing for an easier way of attaching the strings than the traditional manner. But most important, the fretwork is clean and even across the board, and the action is nice and low. All of the notes ring out true and clear, with no discernible dead spots found anywhere the neck.

DECEPTIVELY SMALL

The WL-35 Jazz, with its small body and ergonomic curves, is a very inviting instrument to play. Its comfy C-shaped neck, tapering gently from 48mm to 60mm, fits my hand nicely and, in conjunction with the low action, makes for a very pleasurable playing experience. A nut width of 1-7/8 inches—narrower than on a standard classical and closer to my Collings 001 Mh—helps make stretchy Ted Greene-style chords less problematic. And the elegant gold Gotoh tuning pegs with ebony knobs feel solid and reliable.

The WL-35 Jazz has a very nicely balanced sound, not as loud or bottom-rich as a full-size classical guitar, but far from thin or boxy, and the Guatemalan rosewood seems to add a hint of appealing brightness. My first reaction was that the guitar sounded bigger than it looked, and I found it hard to put down. When I tried using a pick, the notes blossomed with very little compression. I played a few classical pieces and jazz tunes, as well as some of my own more ambient fare. While the guitar felt a little light on the bottom for the traditional Spanish repertoire, its clarity and quick response were great for the other approaches.

When a friend asked for some nylon-string on a recording session, I knew it would be a good opportunity to see how the guitar fared in the studio. On the session, I used an AKG C414 EB microphone and played mostly fingerpicked lead lines on a Middle Eastern-flavored jazz tune. The mic liked this guitar a lot. I was able to get a great recorded tone with minimal fuss—just a touch of compression and no EQ.

The L.R. Baggs Session-VTC undersaddle pickup sounds great: round and full, with crisp articulation and no shrillness at all. I was also able to dial in pleasurable tones, whether via DI, a Fender Princeton Reverb, or a Henriksen Blu amp, with the aid of the soundhole-mounted volume and tone controls. The Baggs system paired nicely with a Catalinbread Echorec delay pedal and a Chase Bliss Audio Dark World reverb, and the pickup's onboard tone control helped me shave some of the extra highs incurred when I used a flatpick. In short, the Session-VTC pickup, with its rich and balanced tone, is an outstanding option for the gigging guitarist.

All in all, the Wee Lowden WL-35 Jazz is a very fine instrument, impeccably built of premium tonewoods, and possessed of a beguiling, inviting tonality. It's an ideal choice for the steel-string guitarist looking for an expanded sonic arsenal, as well as the jazz guitarist seeking that nylon-string sound coupled with modern playability. A definite winner. AG

SPECS

BODY WL body (parlor-sized with 13-3/16" lower bout and 4" depth); solid Alpine spruce top; solid Guatemalan rosewood back and sides; rosewood bridge with 12-hole tie bar; satin polyurethane lacquer finish

NECK Five-piece neck (mahogany/purpleheart/walnut); 610mm-scale ebony fretboard; 1-7/8" nut width; gold Gotoh SG381 tuners with ebony buttons; satin polyurethane lacquer finish

OTHER Bone nut and saddle; L.R. Baggs Session-VTC undersaddle pickup; Savarez Red (treble) and D'Adarrio Pro Arte (bass) strings; Ameritage hardshell case; available left-handed

MADE IN Northern Ireland

PRICE $7,600 street

lowdenguitars.com

Schertler Roy

The Swiss Army knife of acoustic amplifiers

BY MATT BLACKETT



Thanks to their full-range sound capabilities and multiple input options, many acoustic guitar amplifiers have been called miniature PA systems. That has never been so true as with Roy, a top-of-the-line package from Schertler, the Swiss maker. Dubbed a "combo amplifier for acoustic instruments," Roy (an anglicization of *roi*, French for "king") is actually way more than that, packing a huge number of features into a surprisingly compact enclosure. I tested it with a Babicz Identity, a Fishman-equipped Lanikai ukulele, a Carvin bass, and a Neumann TLM 127 to mic up vocals and other acoustic instruments.

Our review Roy features Schertler's Anthracite enclosure—a rugged, durable gray finish that seems like it could handle any gig-related abuses. (An elegant, living-room-approved wood cabinet is also available.) The front shows the two 8-inch speakers, the 1-inch horn tweeter, and the port residing behind the sturdy metal grille. But the top panel is the real showstopper, with its array of jacks, knobs, buttons, and effects matrix. And just in case you were still thinking that Roy is playing around, it says right on top, "class-A high-voltage preamp, no integrated circuits, no NFB." No negative feedback? Roy for the win!

I carried Roy into my studio, which is a little more challenging than it sounds due to the amp's nearly 50-pound heft. I needed to choose one of the seven channels for my Babicz jumbo. Channels 1 and 2 feature XLR inputs and 1/4-inch insert jacks, so I went with channel 3, which, like channel 4, also gives you a handy 1/4-inch instrument input. I turned the volume up and strummed a chord and was instantly pleased with the big, full sound—definitely more muscular than the amp's size might suggest. The tone was great with the three-band EQ set at noon, but things got sweeter when I bumped the lows and highs a touch. Louder volumes brought on some low-end feedback, and that's where the handy Reson (as in resonance) switch and knob come in. They allow you to attenuate low feedback at either 150 or 240Hz. This proved very effective at keeping my big sound under control.

Now I was rolling. I grabbed my channel's reverb knob and added a little bloom. It's a really good-sounding reverb, reacting nicely to subtle picking and not getting washy with hard strumming. Figuring that if one effect is good, more are better, I selected the Chorus+Delay preset and dialed it in with the Multieffect knob. Now I had a huge, produced sound that really filled the room. This particular delay is set at 150ms, but, if you can live without chorusing, you can choose from 100, 200, 300, 400, 500, and 800ms echoes. Other effect highlights include the medium-speed flanger and the Voice Doubler—a sweet delay/reverb.

Bear in mind, this is all just one instrument in one channel. Roy is capable of *way* more than that. I plugged my ukulele into channel 4 and didn't do anything but add a little 'verb for a perfectly gig-worthy tone. Adding the Neumann to channel 1 and engaging the 48v phantom power switch, I selected the Voice Doubler effect, slathered a little reverb on top of that, and sang a uke arrangement of "Daydream Believer" that my cat seemed to really like. As a bonus, channels 1 and 2 feature a semi-parametric EQ for even more precise tone sculpting.

Getting back to the mini-PA idea, I plugged my trusty 1980s Carvin bass into the 1/4"-only channel 5. Now, two 8-inch speakers—subwoofers though they may be—can only handle so much low end. But the fact is, it sounded great. I could absolutely see Roy ruling a coffeehouse gig with guitar, bass, and two (or more) vocals. If you really want to maximize things, you can add an external subwoofer from Schertler for even more of a full-range system.

The last thing I did was aim the Neumann at a few other acoustic instruments (including my cherished 1930 Martin 0-18) and blast them through the Roy, all with stellar results. This got me thinking about the flexibility and potential of this compact powerhouse. You could have several instruments and vocalists, all with effects and EQ. You can run backing tracks, drum loops, and more through the stereo ins on channels 6 and 7. You can slap a compressor or EQ (or any other effect) across all channels with the global insert. You can interface with larger systems, allowing you to scale Roy into Super Roy. I don't really play the kind of gigs that Roy is so great for, but this system is so smart and powerful it makes me want to book those gigs. Hats off to Roy! AG

SPECS

AMP Seven channels, 400 watts; four XLR inputs, three 1/4" instrument inputs, four 1/4" channel inserts, one 1/4" global insert, 1/8" stereo-in, 1/4" l/r stereo-in, XLR DI out, 1/4" line-out, 1/4" aux-out, 1/4" headphone-out

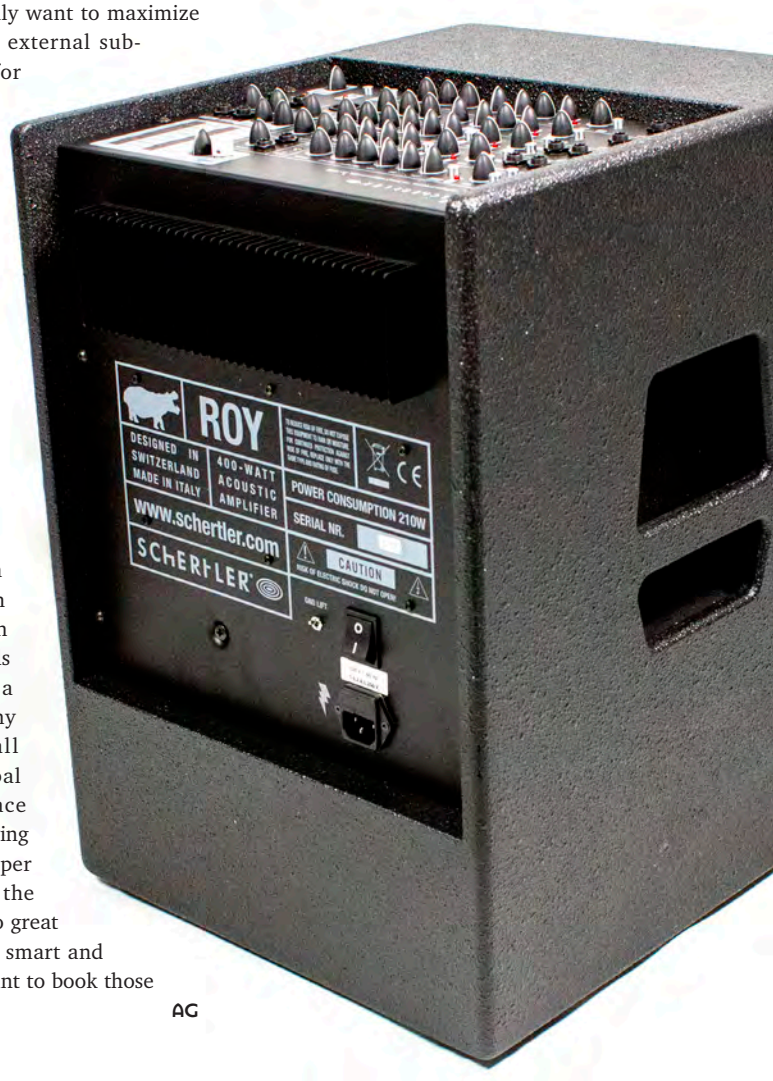
SPEAKERS Two 8" subwoofers, one 1" horn tweeter

OTHER Reverb with decay and level controls, multieffect with mix and level controls, semi-parametric EQ (chan. 1 and 2), low cut and mute buttons, 10v and 48v phantom power; 14" W x 16.3" D x 20" H; 48.5 lbs

MADE IN Switzerland

PRICE $2,088 retail

schertler.com



Shubb Capo Royale

Gold-standard accessory receives fresh finishes

BY KATE KOENIG





The new Shubb Capo Royale series shows off the brand's classic design for steel-, nylon-, 12-string guitars, and other fretted instruments, in two new beautiful sheens. Essentially the same model as the C1, the Capo Royale ($21.95 street) is available in Gold and Rose Gold. Both finishes accentuate Shubb's vintage/Art Deco aesthetic, as seen especially in the company's logo, and make for a stylish touch on any guitar.

Shubb stands out among the most popular capos for its elegantly simple lever design. As one of its main selling points, this unique construction is said to most effectively reduce tuning issues when clamping and removing the capo. Part of it has to do with the custom rubber used on both arms of the capo, which is designed to mimic the fingertips and feels soft and spongy.

The other part is the capo's adjustability—you can tighten or loosen the amount of locking pressure by turning the screw on the outer arm. This might be a drawback if you're playing live and switching between guitars with different sized necks, but it does pay off in having that extra control over how the capo fits on your guitar.

In 1998, Shubb introduced the flagship Deluxe capo, with its unique roller design, which is now standard across the lineup, including on the Capo Royale. Many years ago, I was gifted a Shubb that featured the original Delrin screw-cap design, and the roller is definitely an improvement; locking the capo is smoother and takes less force.

I tested the Capo Royale on my acoustic guitars, and barely—if at all—had to retune when using and removing it. What I love about the Shubb design is how compact and simple it is, plus how efficiently it functions. A device that's as small as can be while still getting the job done is ideal. The capo looks like something you'd stumble upon at a hip jewelry boutique, with such a barebones, unpretentious design that you're wowed by how well it works. **shubb.com**



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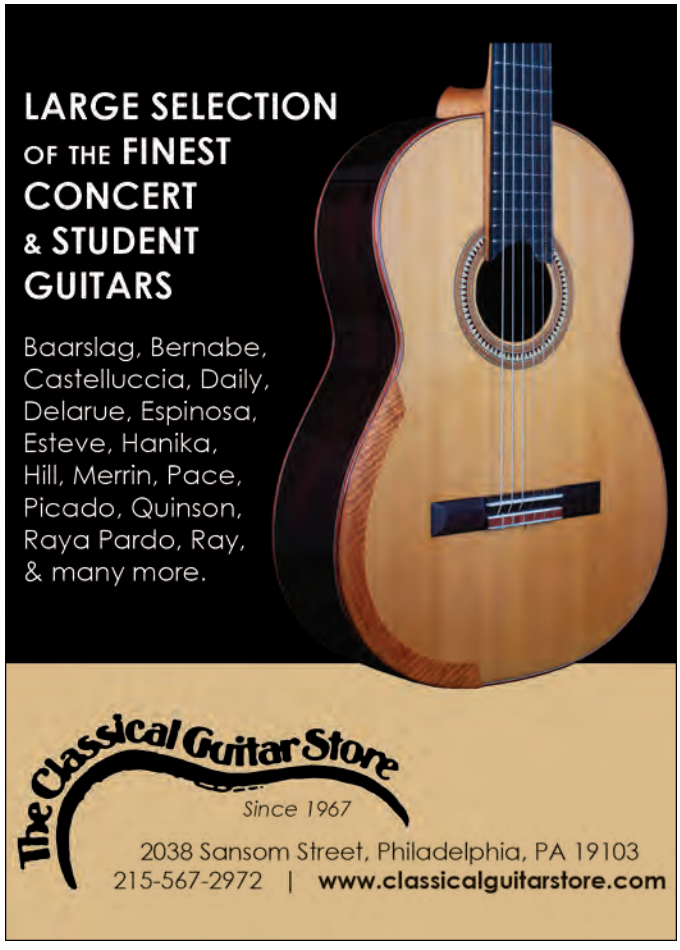
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Premium strings designed to bring out the best in any guitar

BY NICK ROSSI



SonoTone, a small-batch guitar-string company based in Massachusetts, prides itself on design and tone, as well as the pitch accuracy of its handiwork. Developed to faithfully produce authentic vintage tones from the 1950s–'70s, SonoTone's American-made strings are available in two types for acoustic guitarists: phosphor bronze Symphonic and Concert brass. Both sets promise a bright, sustained, and balanced sound and share similar construction: custom formulated alloys on hex cores. Each is offered in a basic range of gauges: .011–.050, .012–.053, and .013–.056.

For this review, I used a 1934 Epiphone Broadway archtop, on which I have tested a wide variety of bronze strings. It's a dynamic, expressive instrument and a good baseline, as it is my main performance and practice guitar.

The medium light Symphonics (.012–.053) strung up quickly and easily; once brought up to pitch, the intonation was well within five cents. Some minor, expected finger noise aside, the break-in period was a quite short: three or so days of moderate use with very little loss of string brilliance. The strings were bright without being brash, with a noticeable amount of pleasant, ringing sustain, and individual notes from string to string and up and down the fretboard were balanced as well.

The SonoTones performed well in a variety of contexts: early jazz-style plectrum guitar, hard-driving swing rhythm, and chord-melody playing. Beyond acoustic jazz, the strings were well suited to blues and folk, whether articulated with a pick or fingerstyle. Big pop/rock chords sounded particularly good, making the strings highly versatile. The SonoTones managed to exhibit a great amount of power but also responded well to a sensitive touch. As a player accustomed to round-core, lower-tension strings, my only complaint was that the SonoTones have a noticeably higher string tension. While this tension is not significantly higher than other hex-core phosphor bronze strings, there are lower-tension options available at both lower and higher price points.

Overall, the cost of these strings ($18.99 direct) might be the main sticking point for some working guitarists. But for the studio or home player looking for great-sounding, balanced strings with excellent intonation, SonoTone is a very good option. **sono-tone.com**

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PLAYLIST



Peppino D'Agostino, *Connexion,* peppinodagostino.com

A Rich and Varied Tapestry

Peppino D'Agostino has much to say on instrumental tour de force

BY BLAIR JACKSON

Italy-born, California-based guitarist and composer Peppino D'Agostino has long been admired as a master of a multiplicity of techniques and approaches to solo playing, an unabashed eclectic willing to tackle almost any style, and also a generous collaborator eager to let other musicians shine in his spotlight. He is impossible to pigeonhole, with influences and inclinations literally all over the map, but as a body of work, his many albums since his late 1980s breakthrough all display a virtuosity that mostly does not call attention to itself as showy or indulgent, a deep knowledge of and sensitivity to the many genres he explores in his work—including folk, jazz, Latin, rock, classical, funk, flamenco, and various undefinable amalgamations and extrapolations thereof—and an unerring belief in the power of melody to transport the listener. He is a brilliant rhythmic player as well and uses harmonics as interestingly as anyone, but a soaring or subtle melodic figure is never too far away.

D'Agostino's latest album, *Connexion*, embodies all the traits I've described above over the course of ten tracks that vary considerably from tune to tune in terms of style, but are unified by his wondrous playing on the Robert Godin–designed signature model Seagull guitar that he has favored for more than decade. It's a clear-sounding and powerful instrument, captured beautifully by engineer Masaki Liu, who manages to bring out every nuance in the guitarist's varied arsenal.

The album opens with a moody piece called "High Plains Guitarra," which D'Agostino describes as a "humble homage to two music legends: Paco de Lucía and Ennio Morricone," and indeed it is easy to hear the Spanish/flamenco flavors, as well as the wide open, almost desolate sound of Morricone's Spaghetti Western soundtracks. "Dancing with Shadows" instantly changes the mood of the album—here, the homage is mainly to the doo-wop groups of the 1950s, and he overlays a haunting street-corner melody on top of steady rhythmic chops so characteristic of that style. With its haunting bent notes, it also brings to mind Santo & Johnny's "Sleep Walk." (See page 92 for a transcription and some tips for playing this tune.)

"Head Case" is the lone clunker on the album in my view, an abrasive, occasionally dissonant number that sounds like a warm-up gone wrong. At just 1:30 in length, however, it is quickly behind us! Fortunately, it is followed by one of my favorite pieces on the album, "Buster," a tribute to the extraordinary fingerpicking wizard and fellow Godin artist Buster B. Jones (U.S. National Fingerstyle champion in 1990), who died in 2009 at just 49 years old. D'Agostino's piece starts out as a slightly Kottke-esque ramble but then accelerates and gets crazier toward the end, very Jones-like in its barely controlled recklessness. Again there's some wonderfully creative note-bending, sometimes two at once in harmony.

"Mara's Sleeping Song" is one of two numbers on the album that effectively pair D'Agostino with an electric guitarist—the achingly pretty melody has what I would call a Windham Hill-ish vibe, and Stef Burns tastefully doubles and improvises over the simple tune (written by mandolinist Caterina Lichtenberg) to marvelous effect. What a little jewel it is! The other is the emotional "Stammi Vicino" ("Stand by Me" or "Stand Next to Me") co-written with Burns (who is once again featured on *crying* lead guitar) and well-known Italian singer-songwriter Vasco Rossi; another very strong melodic number. (Rossi's sung version appeared on his 2011 album *Vivere O Niente*.)

My favorites of the remaining pieces are the evocative "Mexican Sunrises," which shows D'Agostino's ability to deliver sturdy bass figures under a lilting melody, and the elegiac "Jenny's Goodbyes," about "a wonderful woman that left us too early," a gorgeous tribute.

Connexion packs so much into 33 minutes. Yes, it's a virtuoso at work, but beyond that it is a showcase for a songwriter of great depth and imagination. Highly recommended! **AG**



Hawktail

Formations

(Padiddle)

Group moves beyond neo-grass tag

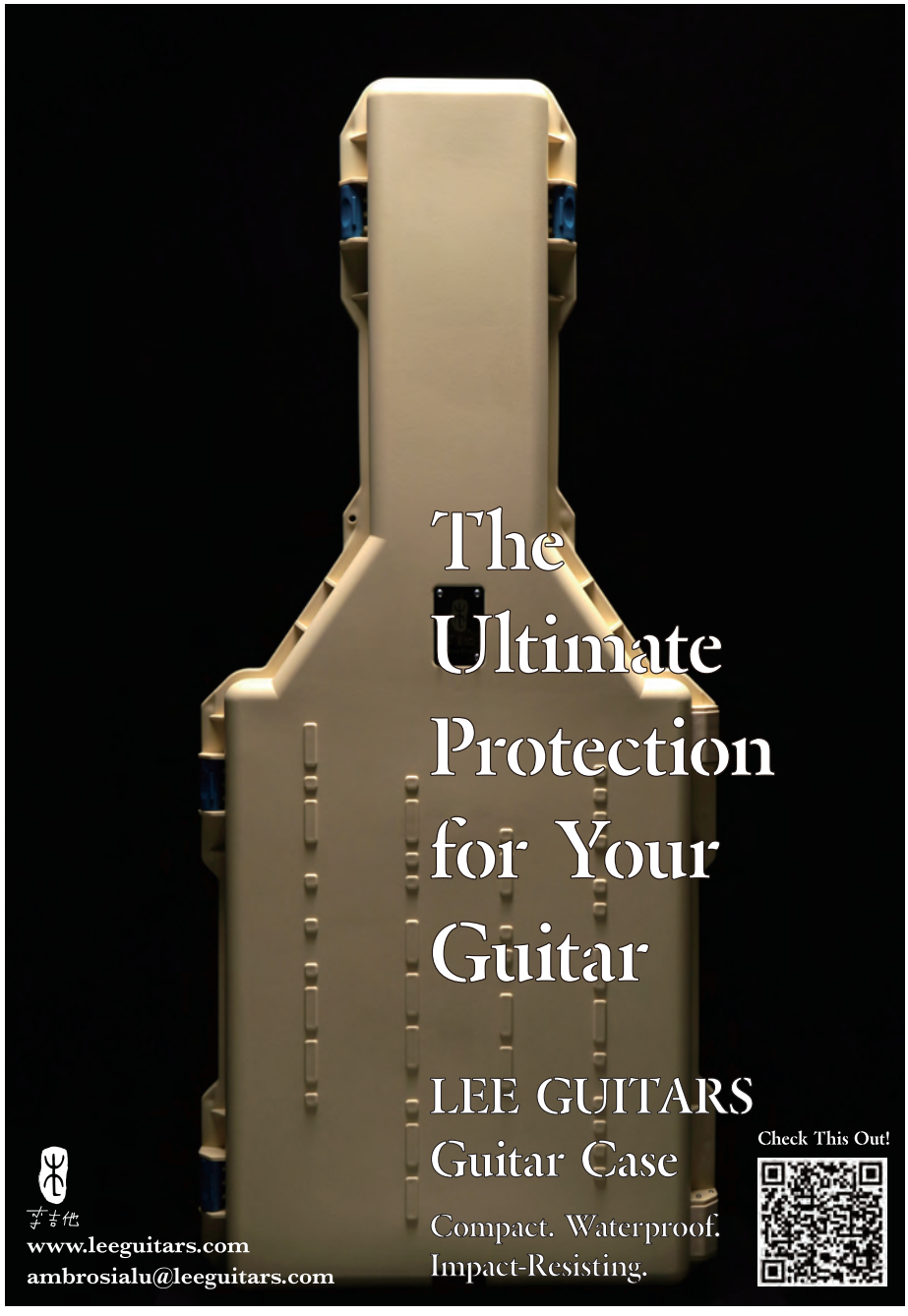
The biggest name in Hawktail is fiddler Brittany Haas, who's played with Crooked Still, Béla Fleck, Alasdair Fraser, Steve Martin, Dave Rawlings Machine, Darol Anger's Republic of Strings, and the house band of Chris Thile's *Live from Here.* But really, the greatest strength of these players—Paul Kowert (upright bass), Dominick Leslie (mandolin), and Jordan Tice (guitar)—is their ability to write, think, and move as an ensemble.

Pieces like "Annbjørg" begin with Haas' love for Scandinavian folk fiddling, then gradually morph as the tune travels around the quartet, with Punch Brother Kowert reinterpreting the melody in an arco middle section while Leslie and Tice provide a shifting rhythm accompaniment. In others, like "Last One on the Line," Leslie launches into a theme that floats midway between Ireland and Appalachia, then passes it to Tice, who flatpicks a series of variations before sending it to Haas and Kowert, who play in a jazzy unison that slowly, carefully returns to Leslie's original melody.

Others still, like "Dandelion," begin and end with Tice, who fingerpicks an airy, floating melody strong enough to support the improvisations that swirl around it, even a double-time, full-quartet section lead by Kowert, who's never sounded better, and Haas, who plays with a startling economy that shifts between melody and rhythm. It's just one of the many quiet, patient surprises on *Formations,* and on this first album with Leslie as a full-fledged, writing member, Hawktail leaps over its history as a neo-grass trio, expanding its range beyond anything it's done in the past.

—Kenny Berkowitz











Jeff Gunn

Sonic Tales

(Fretmonkey Records)

Tales of mystery and imagination

Inspired by fellow Canadian Lenny Breau, guitarist Jeff Gunn draws on jazz, flamenco, and Travis-style fingerpicking to tell a series of impressionist stories on his second solo album, *Sonic Tales*. While flamenco-derived *golpes* propel Gunn's oblique narratives, harp-like harmonics shimmer like stars in the night sky to point the way ahead. It's celestial navigation—with guitar.

True to its title, "Beginnings" bursts out of the gate with tumbling *rasgueado* strumming and percussive effects that suggest enigmatic spirit-tapping. On "Luminescence," spiraling glissandos alternate with climbing chords that reference the post-bop piano of Breau influence Bill Evans. A cascade of harmonics on the evocative "Starlight on a Winter's Evening" jangles like the tintinnabulations of wind chimes caught in a sudden gust. Before the tune settles into a bouncy jazz melody swept along by legato picking, Gunn's tricky time-signature-shifting strum on "Wonder" might make you wonder if the disc you're playing is skipping.

Two songs veer outside of Gunn's chosen lane of haunting harmonics coupled with rippling percussion. A collaboration of three guitarists, "Universal Jam" entwines Gunn's syncopated cross-picking with James Bryan's jauntily strummed acoustic and Mark Pelli's elastic bent-note electric lead. Gunn's straightforward plangent picking propels the traditional Scottish tune "Loch Lomond." Then, suddenly, bright harmonics pinwheel like energy from the Big Bang radiating out into space. With this nod to both the down-home and the cosmic, Gunn concludes his series of tales that evoke memories, mystery, and imagination.

—Pat Moran



Dave Simonett

Red Tail

(Thirty Tigers)

Revealing, plainspoken, Midwestern honesty

In his day job, Dave Simonett is the lead singer, guitarist, and songwriter of Trampled by Turtles, the best prog-bluegrass band to ever bust out of Duluth. On his own, he's released two albums as Dead Man Winter, including the cathartic post-divorce *Furnace* (2017), and now he's finally released an album under his own name. "Lots of things have changed for me, but a lot has stayed the same," says Simonett, trying to describe how this solo album is different from all the others. "I know that's ambiguous."

It sure is. Like a lot of Simonett's work, the songs on *Red Tail* recall mid-'70s Dylan, who left the nearby town of Hibbing 20 years before Simonett was born. Some of that sound still echoes here, just like it does all over the world, but Simonett focuses on the purest Duluth distillate: the slow, cinematic roll of "Revoked," the haunted loneliness of "By the Light of the Moon," and the half-hearted romanticism of "It Comes and Goes," with its insistence that "I like the view out your window/I like the coming cold."

There's plenty to love here, starting with the warm, western fingerpicking of Simonett's acoustic guitar, then moving on to the simple gravitas of piano, the low moan of pedal steel, the occasional burst of distorted electric guitar, and the steady boom-chuck assurance of bass drum. Mostly, for me, it's the quiet lyricism of the songwriting, the sound of Simonett working on his craft and finding new colors to describe this moment of plainspoken, midwestern honesty.

—KB



Leo Wijnkamp

The Incredible Leo Wijnkamp

(MediMuse)

Here's a name you need to know

Leo Wijnkamp might be the best guitarist you've never heard. At 69, he hasn't released an album in 40 years, and his output was pretty slim: two solo albums on Kicking Mule in 1975 and '79, a couple of Mel Bay ragtime guitar instruction books, and a handful of tours with Davey Graham, Stefan Grossman, Bert Jansch, and John Renbourn. That was it.

In the decades since, Wijnkamp has never stopped playing and teaching, mostly in Belgium and the Netherlands, but he's never returned to the studio. That makes *The Incredible* feel old and new at the same time, combining eight cuts from his Kicking Mule days with seven recent live tracks. And though the title sets an impossibly high bar, Wijnkamp manages to meet it.

The early songs retain their sweetness, especially turn-of-the-century rags like James Scott's "Grace and Beauty" (1909) and "Hilarity Rag" (1910), showcasing the graceful touch of Wijnkamp's classical guitar training. Coming from the Netherlands, he makes no attempt at what we used to call authenticity, filtering these pieces through a European sensibility and performing them alongside light, playful versions of Eric Satie's "Gnossienne" (1893) and Claude Debussy's "Golliwog's Cakewalk" (1906). The later cuts are at least as good, including a joyful fandango for his granddaughter and a beautifully unlikely, syncopated treatment of Anton Karas' "Harry Lime Theme" (1949). Playing live in Amsterdam, Wijnkamp closes this chapter on a high note: a rollicking cover of John Hurt's "Stagolee" and a medley of American fiddle tunes that are distinctively and deliciously un-American. Incredible!

—KB

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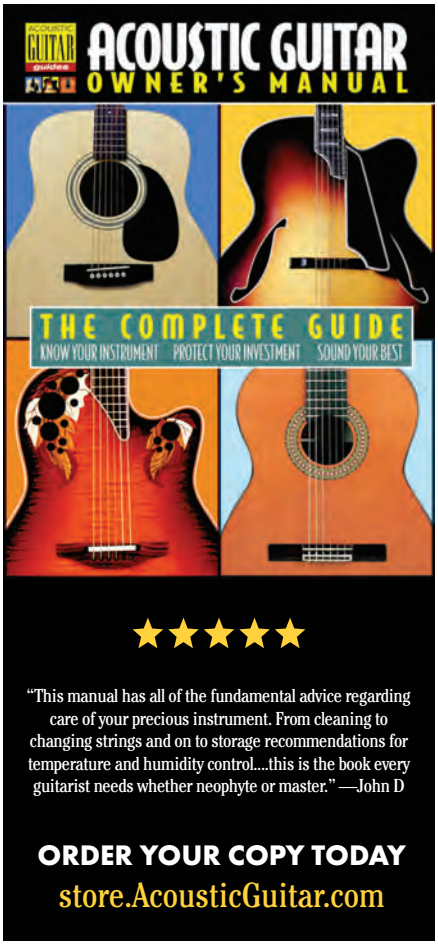
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Stephane Wrembel

The Django Experiment V

(Water Is Life)

More exploration on latest Gypsy jazz 'Experiment'

Before beginning live-on-the floor sessions for *The Django Experiment V*, Stephane Wrembel recorded *Django L'Impressionniste,* an album-length interpretation of 17 little-known Reinhardt solo pieces. The explorations of the Gypsy-jazz master's more outré excursions seem to have bolstered Wrembel's risk-taking instincts. "Improvisation #1" benefits most from Wrembel's deep dive into Reinhardt. Jumping restlessly from a ricocheting two-note figure to bubbling *rasgueado* strumming, Wrembel's solo guitar paints an abstract portrait of Gypsy jazz.

A playful jaunt through Fats Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose" returns the set to familiar Sinti swing, before the mockingbird cackle of Nick Driscoll's saxophone triggers Wrembel's pin-wheeling triplets. By track's end, breezy string jazz and cacophonous freestyle have battled to a stalemate. Reinhardt's "Daphne" is an ebullient slipknot shuffle until second guitarist Thor Jensen's rattlesnake strumming and Daisy Castro's vortex of witchy violin cue Wrembel's atonal careening-through-the guardrail guitar. Riding quizzical coils of violin, Reinhardt's "Nuages" becomes a launching pad for spiraling picking from Wrembel, but it's a free-wheeling run-through of Duke Ellington's "Caravan" that ventures furthest afield. Driscoll's snake-charmer saxophone and Jensen's locomotive strumming entwine while Wrembel establishes the tune's melody, but soon, with cascading triplets and scorpion's tail vibrato, Wrembel slingshots the quintessential New York City composition out beyond the Kuiper Belt.

—PM



Seamus Egan

Early Bright

(THL Records)

Solas leader casts wide stylistic net

As co-founder of the popular group Solas, Seamus Egan invigorated Celtic tunes with American folk, and then bounced the hybrid back to Ireland for further iterations, locking Hibernian and Stateside traditions in a constantly changing dance.

For his second solo album, Early Bright, Egan builds on that template, adding classical, pop and progressive rock influences. Propelled by coiling guitars—Kyle Sanna's lead and Egan's nylon-string—"Welcome to Orwell" builds to a whirlwind of picked and strummed updrafts that suggests a gentler folk cousin to Led Zeppelin's "Achilles' Last Stand."

"Simon Nally Hunt the Buck" starts with a Celtic knot of entwined guitars as delicate as a minuet, before ascending in a spidery tarantella. The playful "Two Little Ducks" displays even more Baroque influences. It's a pointillist folk guitar reel that plays like Christy Moore-meets- Mozart. Sanna's distant pedal steel sighs through the pretty cross-picked air "52 Hertz." Here, a cloud layer of harmonium and keyboards conjures echoes of Brian Eno's ambient compositions before Sanna's corkscrewing guitar and Owen Marshall's bouzouki transform the tune into a rollicking céilí.

The gentle "Everything Always Was" casts the album's widest stylistic net, coupling hymn-like harmonium, sinewy guitar, wordless vocals, and country-western twang. It's a snapshot that captures both Ireland's mist-shrouded magic and a rural American landscape thawing with the spring.

A perfect balance of energetic and wistful, modern and traditional, Early Bright finds Egan weaving all his disparate musical strands into an emotionally powerful whole. *—PM*

WATCH D'AGOSTINO PLAY "DANCING WITH SHADOWS" LIVE IN THE *AG* STUDIO
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Peppino D'Agostino



JAREK PEPKOWSKI

Dancing with Shadows

Peppino D'Agostino's inventive take on classic doo-wop

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

When he was growing up in the northern Italian city of Turin, in the 1960s, Peppino D'Agostino lived not far from a ballroom, whose elegant clientele and music captivated his attention. "I remember seeing people all dressed up and wishing I were older so I could go there and dance," he says. "And a lot of the songs they played [in the ballroom] were doo-wop, in 12/8 time. I especially loved the Santo & Johnny instrumental 'Sleep Walk.'"

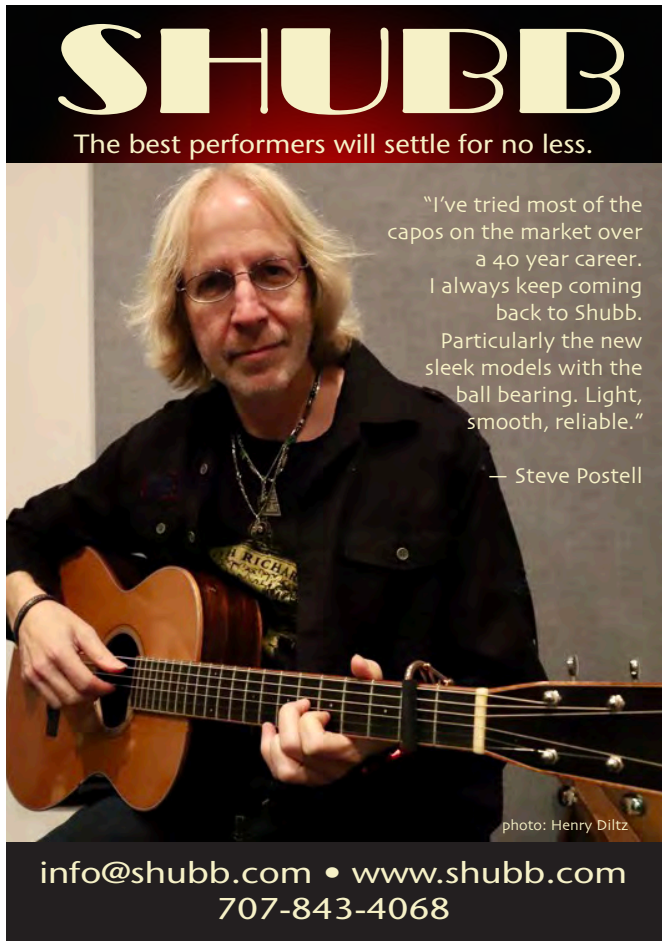
D'Agostino reflects on these formative influences on his composition "Dancing with Shadows," as heard on his latest album, *Connexion* (see review on page 87). The piece is in a tuning of the guitarist's invention—lowest string to highest, F A C E G C—which can be seen as an F major triad on the bottom three strings and a C major triad on the top three, or as an Fmaj9 chord. From standard tuning, raise string 6 a half step; lower string 4 a whole step, string 3 a step and a half, and strings 1 and 2 two steps each.

For a doo-wop feel, D'Agostino plays "Dancing" in 12/8 time, with a typically ambling bass line introduced in bar 6. Start learning the piece by isolating this part, which is seen in the down-stemmed notes. As it falls largely on the open strings, you can focus on the rhythms; play along with D'Agostino's studio recording or the accompanying video on *AG*'s website to cop the 12/8 groove. When you're ready to add the melody, just remember to use the proper dynamic control for the bass line. "As in a painting, the melody should be the subject right up front, close to your eyes, and the bass should be the mountains in the background," D'Agostino says. "You still want to hear the bass, but it shouldn't be too loud. Another thing is to use the flesh of your thumb to play it."

On the upper strings, D'Agostino evokes the steel-guitar parts that Johnny Farina played on the original recording of "Sleep Walk" by using a liberal amount of string bending, a technique used more commonly on the electric guitar than the acoustic. There are three types of bends at play here. The first, seen in bars 6–8 and elsewhere, requires that you pick a note and then push the string toward the ceiling such that the pitch is raised by the indicated amount, either a half or a whole step. Play each bend with your third finger, reinforced by your second and first fingers on the same string. In most cases, as indicated by squiggly horizontal lines, add vibrato by continuing to bend the string slightly, locking in with the bass line at an eighth-note pulse.

The second type of bend, first seen in measure 9, requires that you pre-bend the ninth-fret E, such that it sounds as F; there's also a pre-bend and release in bar 16. To do a pre-bend, you'll need to have the target note in your mind's ear. Practice these moves carefully, striving for pitch accuracy. In the last two bars, D'Agostino bends and releases the open second string behind the nut, toggling between the notes G and A. If your guitar's headstock angle precludes this move, just end the piece on the open second, fourth, and sixth strings—or, as D'Agostino says, laughing, "I'm afraid you might need to buy my signature model Seagull guitar!" AG
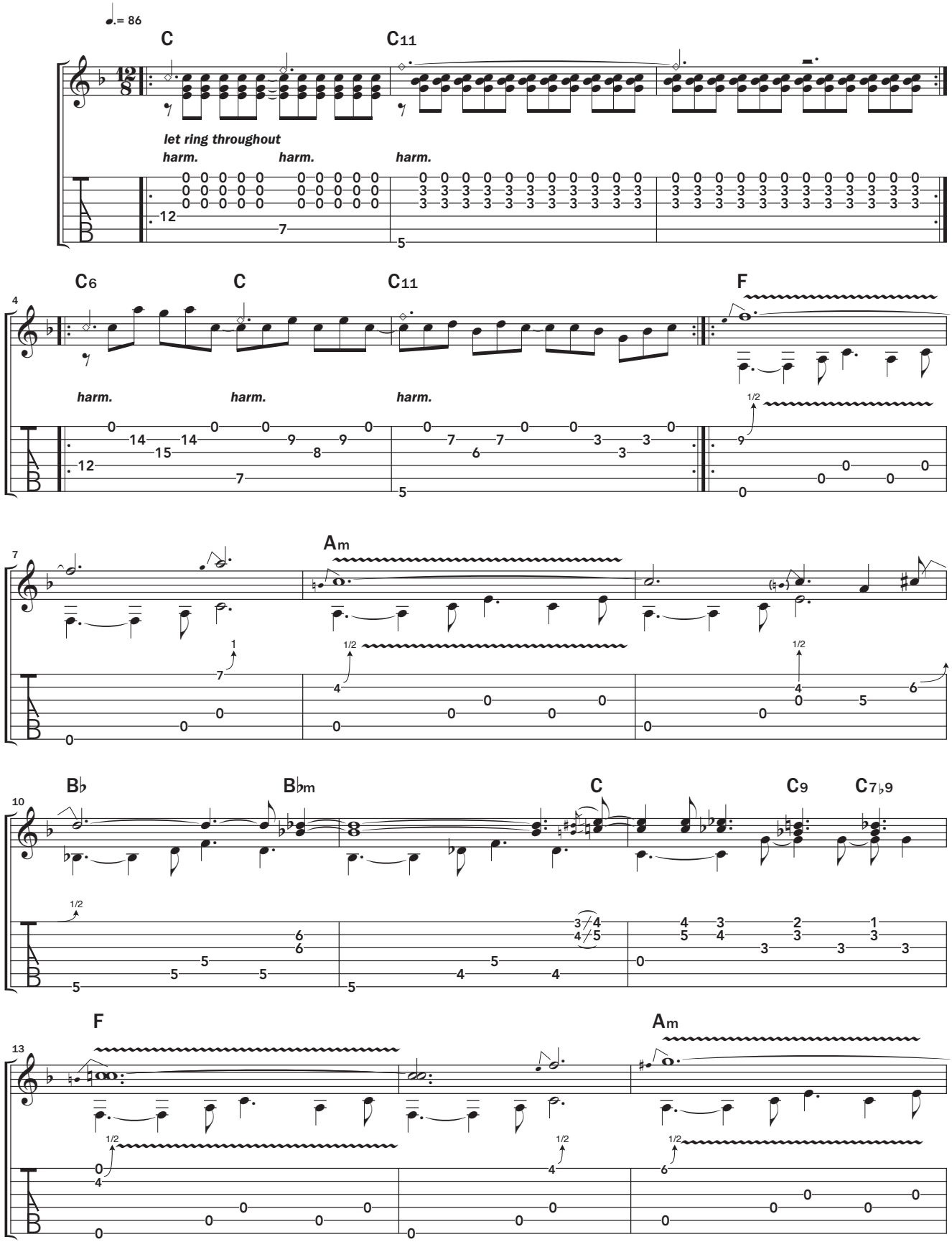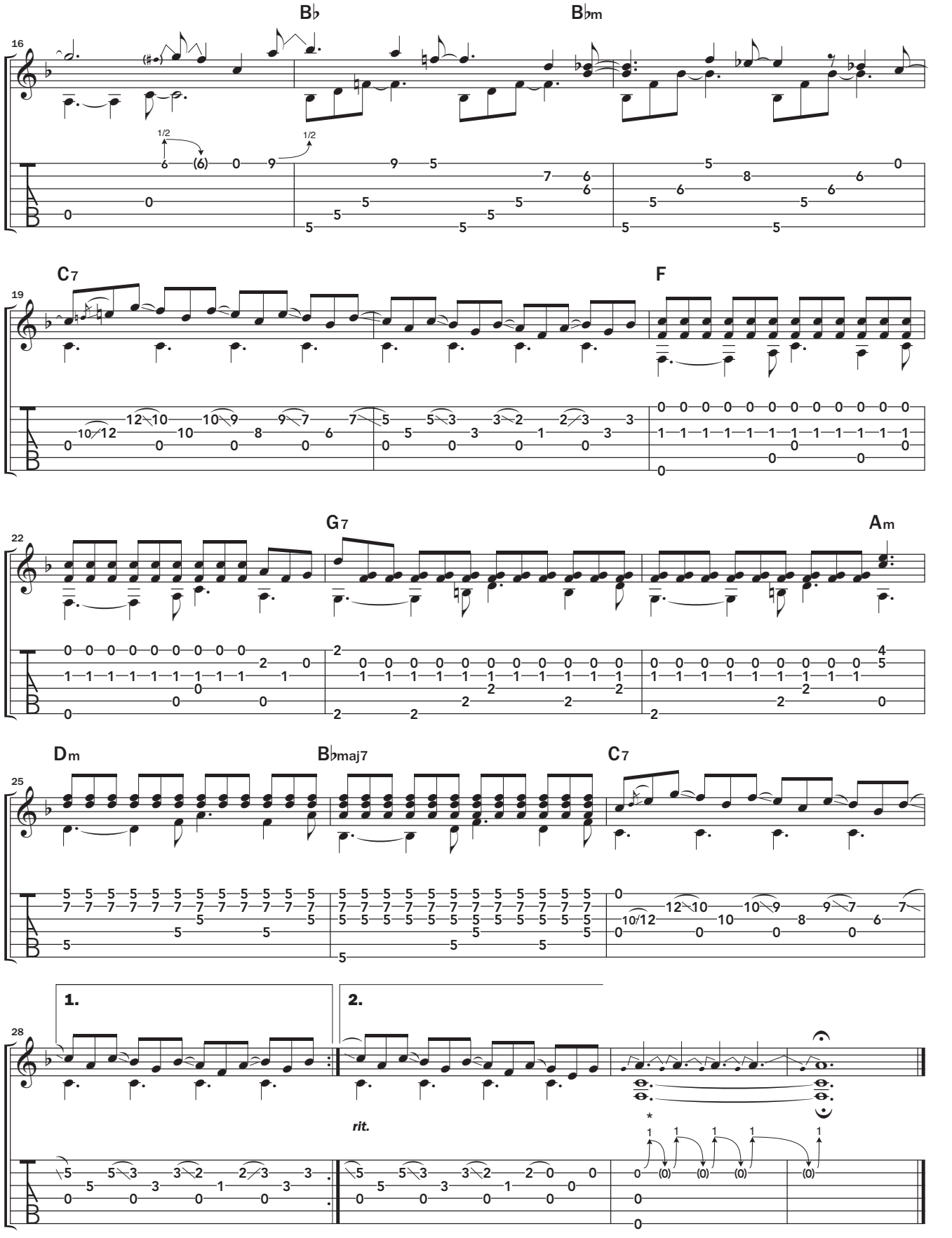




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Tuning: F A C E G C



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*Bend and release string 2 behind nut.

Bukka White's 1933 National Duolian

The blues legend's main guitar goes to the highest bidder

BY GREG OLWELL

From his first records for Victor in 1930, Bukka White—who preferred to be called Booker—played a vigorous style of blues in open tunings that used driving, rhythmic bass lines; a metal slide; and percussive effects, like smacking the strings to the fingerboard with his right hand.

For much of his career, White played this 1933 National Duolian, serial number C7094, which he called "Hard Rock." At a price of $32.50 ($639.14 in today's money) when new, the single-cone Duolian was National's bottom-end model. It featured a thin-gauge steel body, a 12th-fret neck junction, and rolled f-holes. Hard Rock originally left the National factory in Frosted Duco, a unique and delicate crystalline finish that flaked off during decades of White's intensely physical playing. Eventually, White wanted the guitar to shine like new, so in 1972 he had it re-plated to the chrome finish seen here.

Four years later, White gave the well-worn guitar (and a case that had a slide, tone bar, and leather strap in its accessory compartment) to Keith Perry, a friend and photographer in the UK, and acquired a National Style 0 that he used until his death, on February 26, 1977. For his part, Perry kept Hard Rock for decades, showing it off to guitar luminaries like B.B. King (a cousin of White's, who remembered the guitar), Mark Knopfler, Lonnie Donegan, and Derek Trucks.

After popping up in the press several times in the last few years, Hard Rock was sold by the UK-based auction house Gardiner-Houlgate in March 2019 for £93,000 (approx. $120,000), including buyer's fees. AG



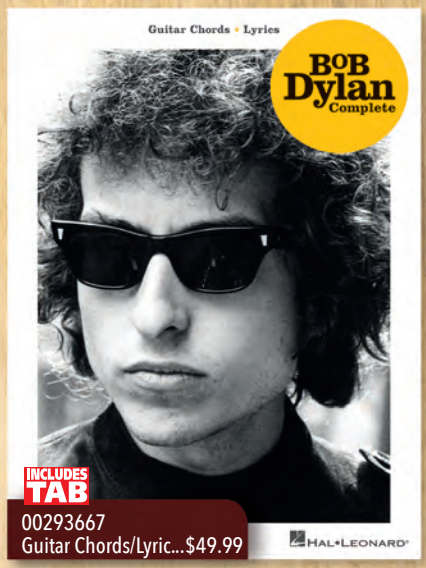
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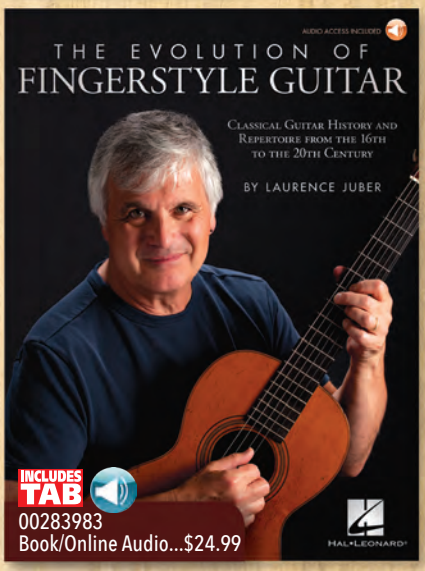
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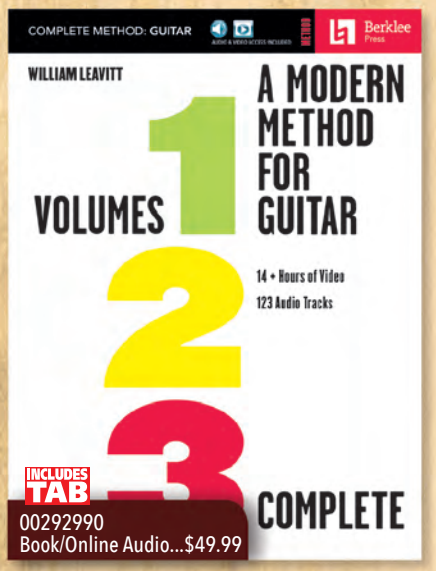
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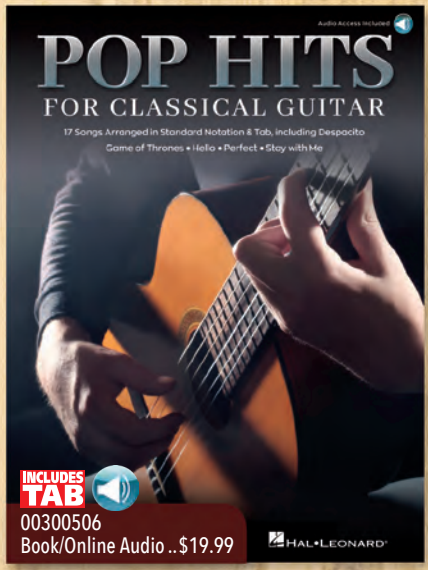
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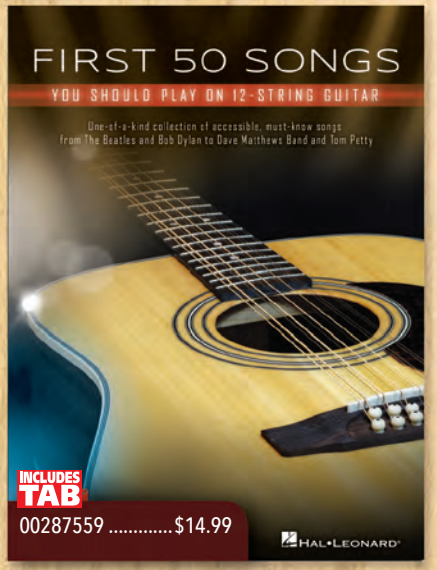
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